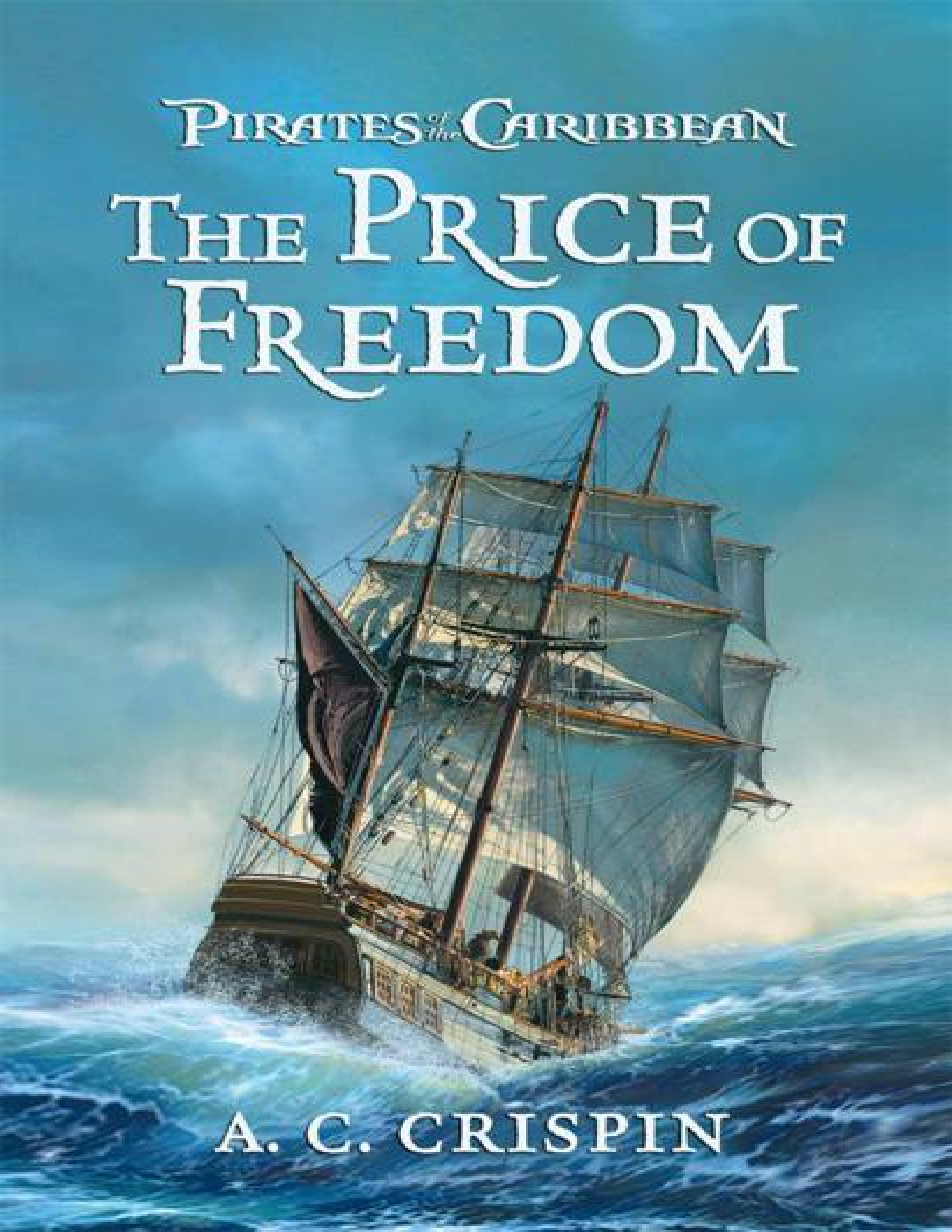
PIRATES of the CARIBBEAN

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM



A. C. CRISPIN

PIRATES of the CARIBBEAN

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

by A. C. CRISPIN

DISNEY EDITIONS
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OceanofPDF.com

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Dedication

This book is dedicated with affection, respect, and gratitude to my longtime friend and fellow writer, Barbara Mertz (Elizabeth Peters).

Barbara's "Amelia Peabody" mysteries taught me to love Egypt and Kush, and it was in her adventure/mystery *The Last Camel Died at Noon* that I first read the legend of Zerzura. Two years ago, when I reread the following lines from the novel, the final pieces of my story fell into place:

"But Zerzura is mentioned in other sources; the name probably derives from the Arabic zarzar*, meaning sparrow, so Zerzura is 'the place of the little birds.'"* (The speaker is her renowned fictional Egyptologist, Radcliffe Emerson; the emphasis is mine.)

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Acknowledgments

Few authors can write a book in a vacuum, and I'm certainly not one of them. *The Price of Freedom* was an ambitious project, three years in the creation and writing. During that time I had a lot of help. With the caveat that any mistakes contained herein are my own, I'd like to thank the following:

My primary beta reader: Victoria Strauss, friend, fellow fantasy author, and Writer Beware partner, who brainstormed, read drafts, listened, counseled, and critiqued. It's no exaggeration to say that this book would never have been completed without her help. Thanks, Vic.

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Captain Lauren Morgens and her crew of the *Kalmar Nyckel*, Delaware's antique recreation tall ship, who also answered dozens of questions very patiently, and allowed me to explore her ship from bow to stern (except she wouldn't let me climb the rigging, darn it!). Captain Morgens explained the true meaning of the command "make fast the bunt gaskets!" and made me *promise* to use it correctly in this book. (Which I did, Cap'n!)

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The staff of the National Museum of African Art museum store, who helped me acquire a very hard-to-get book on the archeological dig in the real Kerma, which is located in what is now Sudan.

My friend Mark Fischer, who toured the USS *Constellation* with me, and provided information on eighteenth-century sailing vessels and weaponry.

The reenactors, docents, and staff of Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown for information on life in the eighteenth century, as well as letting me actually pick up and aim some period weapons.

For creating the Pirates of the Caribbean universe, I would be remiss if I did not mention Disney Studios, Jerry Bruckheimer, screenwriters Terry Rossio and Ted Elliott, as well as the hundreds of cast and crew members who helped create and film the POTC universe, bringing it all to life so vibrantly. Sometimes it’s fun to play in someone else’s sandbox, and this was a rich, flamboyant, and extremely creative “sandbox.”

Thanks also go to Hans Zimmer, for writing those rousing film scores. I played them a lot to get into the mood to write.

And, of course, a very grateful thank you to Johnny Depp, for his unique and amazing abilities as an actor in bringing the character of Jack Sparrow (excuse me! *Captain* Jack Sparrow!) to life with such vivid panache.

I had two dedicated and talented Disney Editions editors while I worked on *The Price of Freedom*:

Jody Revenson, whose creative vision realized that POTC fans wanted “more Jack” and oversaw the conception, storyline creation, and initial launch of this “Captain Jack” prequel. Many thanks, Jody.

Jessie Ward, who brought the project to fruition, month by month, chapter by chapter, scene by scene, down and dirty in the trenches. Writers *need* editors, trust me on this! Thank you, Jessie.

Three people who are, sadly, no longer with us helped inspire much of this book:

My father, Captain George A. Tickell, who taught me to sail and love the sea.

Lewis Moon, who patiently helped me develop the story and stick to my writing schedule.

Robbie Greenberger (1998–2008), son of my friends Bob and Deb Greenberger. Robbie lost his fight with leukemia in August 2008. He was a wonderful young man, with a mop of golden curls, who loved pirates and Pirates of the Caribbean. He is sorely missed by many.

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Brief Historical Note

Readers who are interested in pirates, square-riggers, the early eighteenth century, and ancient Kerma may be interested to know that my instructions in writing this novel were to “stick to historical fact, unless it conflicts with established Pirates of the Caribbean continuity.” I made a faithful effort to do this.

The city of ancient Kerma really existed, located close to the third cataract of the Nile, in the country now called Sudan. The legend of Zerzura is a “real” legend, though the magical island lying off the coast of Western Africa is my own creation.

For the purposes of the story, I also created the island of New Avalon, because I needed an island in that spot, and none of the existing ones were big enough or had the rich soil needed to grow sugarcane.

For information about how real pirates lived, fought, and sailed, I recommend the following books: *The Sea Rover’s Practice* and *The Buccaneer’s Realm*, by Benerson Little, *Under the Black Flag* by David Cordingly, and *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Pirates*, by Gail Selinger with W. Thomas Smith, Jr.

At this point I have a whole shelf of pirate books, but those four were the ones I found myself using the most consistently.

—Ann C. Crispin

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Prologue

Zerzura: The Lost City

THE PHARAOH AWOKE WITH THE LIGHT of the full moon shining on his face, knowing that he had just spoken with his god. His god was named Apedemak, and in the temple renderings, he had the body of a man, but the face of the king of beasts. He was the high god of the people of Kerma, Pharaoh Taharka's island kingdom…an island hidden from the outside world behind a barrier of powerful spells, cloaked in fog and illusion, lying off the coast of the continent men now called Africa.

Taharka rose from his bed, his mind filled with the power of Apedemak's words, words delivered to him in a dream so vivid its images still seemed more real than the waking world. In the corner, the slave whose responsibility it was to keep the overhead frond-fan spinning, to draw in the cooler ocean breezes of the night, started in surprise, gazing questioningly at his master. Taharka shook his head at the man, wordlessly waving him back.

Moving quickly, he removed a short kilt from one of clothing chests lining the wall of his bedchamber. Donning the simple garment, the pharaoh belted it around his waist. The white linen of the kilt appeared doubly light against his mahogany skin. Taharka was nearly fifty, yet his body was as strong and muscular as it had been when he was a youth. Ignoring the elaborately beaded and braided wigs sitting on their stands, the pharaoh left his shaven head bare. He finished his abbreviated toilette by sliding his feet into everyday sandals barely trimmed with gold.

The pharaoh left the royal bedchamber, with its walls showing scenes of royal family life. He needed no light-bearer to illumine his path. The moonlight was so strong one could almost discern the vivid colors of the painted images and the lotus-topped columns.

Taharka's sandals made faint swishing sounds against the cool stone floors as he walked slowly down the hall to the first of his children's chambers. There, as he had known he would, he found his queen, Tiyy. She was sitting at the bedside of their youngest son, Prince Aniba, gently stroking his brow and murmuring to him, as the six-year-old prince's nursemaid carefully sponged the child's bared chest with cool water. Taharka winced when he saw the marks of his little son's ribs beneath his skin. The boy had fallen sick with this feverish wasting illness nearly a month ago, and he was clearly losing the battle. Last week, without telling his queen, Taharka had quietly given orders to have a small royal tomb chiseled from the cliffs behind the palace, close to the tombs already carved for himself, his queen, and his two elder children, Prince Shabako and Princess Amenirdis.

As he heard his father's soft step, the child turned his head, and his lips curved upward in a weak smile. "Father," he whispered.

Taharka bent down and kissed his son's cheek, feeling dry heat against his lips. The fever was not high, but it was relentless, and slowly, slowly, it was burning away the young prince's life. It was not proper for a pharaoh to display despair, or for a father to show fear, so Taharka was careful not to reveal his reaction as he straightened, smiling down at his youngest. "My boy," he said softly. "Did you eat all of the soup your mother prepared with her own hands? You need your strength."

Little Prince Aniba nodded solemnly. "Almost all," he assured his father, with a quick sideways glance at his mother…a look that begged her not to reveal that he lied.

Queen Tiyy smiled lovingly at her son and nodded agreement. “He did very well, husband.”

The pharaoh nodded. “Good, good,” he said. “Soon you will be well, and we shall go together in my chariot to the royal preserve to see the lions. You shall ride with me, and you may help me drive my horses!”

For a second the child’s wan features brightened into a genuine smile, as a flash of the real Prince Aniba showed through the wasted flesh. “Oh, yes, Father!” he said. “You will let me hold the reins? And we can see the lions?”

“You have my word as pharaoh that we will do it as soon as you are strong enough, my son,” Taharka said, touching the sacred bracelet that he never removed, the broad golden wristlet that was incised with the stylized head of a lion, symbol of Apedemak and the royal house of Kerma. The pale green gems that traced the lion’s head had come from the Heart of Zerzura, the sacred stone lying in the palm of the golden statue of Apedemak that stood far below the earth in the heart of the ancient labyrinth. The chamber at the heart of the labyrinth contained the island’s greatest material treasures: gold, gems, and sacred texts detailing the story of their people’s journey from their ancient homeland of Kush, millennia ago. But those worldly treasures paled in comparison to the Heart of Zerzura itself. Without the magical powers of the Heart, Kerma would be no more. The gem pulsed with the power imbued in it by the god himself.

Prince Aniba’s dark eyes shone in the faint light cast by the oil lamps as he saw his father take this sacred oath. “I cannot wait, Father!”

“Then hurry and get well, my son,” Taharka replied. “But to do that, you will need your rest. Can you close your eyes and sleep now?”

The little boy nodded. His eyelids were growing heavy; even the smallest exertion tired him. His parents and the nursemaid watched in silence as the little prince fell asleep.

Taharka glanced at his queen. “We need to talk,” he said softly. “Come.” Tiyy rose slowly, stiff from sitting so long and half-faint from exhaustion. Taharka caught her arm to steady her. The queen glanced worriedly at her son, clearly reluctant to leave him for even a moment. For who knew how many more moments she would have with him?

“Menhutep will care for him,” Taharka assured his wife. “She loves him as if he were her own.”

The nursemaid nodded agreement. “You need rest, Royal Lady. I shall keep watch, and will summon you at the slightest change in the prince’s condition.”

Tiyy’s shoulders suddenly sagged, and she gave in, allowing her husband to lead her from the sick chamber. The pharaoh put an arm around her slighter form, steadying her as he guided her through the living quarters of the royal palace, faintly lit by oil lamps tended by the slaves, but even more brightly illumined by the moonlight through the floor-to-ceiling windows designed to capture the faintest of the ocean breezes in this hot climate. As they reached the end of the private wing of the palace, he turned her, and they stepped out onto a balcony overlooking Zerzura, the Shining City. Below them lay the great harbor, with moonlight gleaming on the waves. They stood side by side, Taharka’s arm still protectively around his wife’s shoulders, gazing out at their domain.

Finally Queen Tiyy roused herself from her sad reverie and looked up at her husband. Tenderly he touched her cheek, his fingers brushing lightly over her tightly curled hair, cropped short into a dark aureole to facilitate wearing her royal wigs. Her eyes, enhanced with the traditional kohl, were large and the color of onyx as they searched his features intently. “Something is different about you, my king. What has happened?”

Taharka nodded. His queen was as perceptive as she was wise. Looking down at her, seeing her lovely but

strained features, he summoned his courage and resolve. *It is the only way that our son might be saved….*

"I dreamed tonight," he said slowly. "And in my dream Apedemak spoke to me and told me what I must do."

Queen Tiyy's eyes widened. "Tell me this dream, husband."

Taharka closed his own eyes, the better to recall every detail. "I dreamed that I was driving my chariot along the beach. The waves rolled in and splashed my chariot wheels. My horses plunged along, their hooves flinging up sand and surf. I could taste the salt on my lips. Ra cast his golden rays down from the sky, and it seemed that the beach had no end. It was a moment of great joy."

The pharaoh took a deep breath. "Then, suddenly, in the way of dreams, everything changed. Before me there was a great wall of stone, a cliff so sheer and high there was no climbing it. I fought to slow the horses, lest we crash into it. I brought them to a halt barely in time. As I turned them, thinking to go back, I saw that there was another cliff behind me. I was hemmed in between the cliffs and the sea. There was nowhere to go. As I hesitated, trying to decide what to do, I heard Aniba calling me. 'Father…' he wailed. 'Help me!'"

Queen Tiyy's eyes filled with tears, but she did not allow them to fall. Taharka saw her blink them back, and his heart tightened in his breast. "What then?" she asked.

"I heard a sound from the cliff to my right. When I turned my head, a great golden lion came bounding down the sheer face of the stone. It was much larger than any lion I had ever seen. His mane gleamed like the sun, making a nimbus of light around his face. He leaped down from the cliff and stood before me. The horses plunged in their traces with terror. But then the lion spoke, and they fell quiet, and stood as still as the statues in the temples."

"The lion…spoke?" Her voice trembled.

“Yes. His voice was the crashing of the surf in a storm, the rumble of thunder, and the sound the earth makes when it shakes…all those sounds together. It was when I heard that voice that I knew this was no ordinary lion, but Apedemak himself. His words echo still in my mind: ‘Look to the sea, Taharka. You must cross the great ocean. Only by doing so will you find the means to save what you hold dearest. It is the only way.’ And when the lion finished speaking, his mane blazed up so brightly that I could no longer look, but had to shut my eyes and turn my face away. When I opened my eyes again, I awakened to find the moonlight on my face. But I knew I had just experienced a true dream, one such as the priests describe. I knew the god had told me what I must do.”

“Cross the sea…” murmured Tiyy. When she looked up at her husband, fear shadowed her features. “Leave our island, husband? Leave your people, who need your rule, your strong hand to guide them? Go out into the world? We have been protected from outsiders for so long! Who knows what evils may be found in the outside world these days? Cannot you send General Kashta and High Priest Senkamanisken? They are strong, able men who are loyal to you. They would travel and search to the doors of death and beyond for you!”

Pharaoh Taharka shook his head. “You know I am the only one who can undertake this quest, my queen,” he said. “Surely you have not forgotten what I wear?” He held up his right arm. In the moonlight, the wide wristlet gleamed, and the gemstones glittered. Deprived of their color, they flashed like the moonlight along the wave crests. “I do not speak of it often, but recall that my bracelet is one of the Three.”

Long ago, when the two kingdoms of Egypt and Kush had been one, the sons and daughters of Kush had turned their faces from the old life to travel west, toward the setting sun, leaving behind all that they had known. They

had acted because Apedemak had appeared to the son of their pharaoh and the chief priest to express his wishes that his chosen people should depart and found a new land to the west. To guide them on their journey, he had given them the Heart, and, acting on his orders, the priests had used tiny slivers from the Heart to fashion the three bracelets. Each endowed the wearer with certain powers. The one Taharka wore gave its wearer the power of navigation—of locating whatever it was that the wearer needed. The bracelet's magic would guide him, anywhere in the world, to achieve his quest. It also granted him insight, a great gift for a man who must rule wisely.

The pharaoh's thirteen-year-old son and heir, Prince Shabako, wore the one that would allow him to unlock any lock, any portal. Its power extended to unlocking hearts, both human and animal. He had never met a stranger, it seemed.

Taharka's daughter, fifteen-year-old Princess Amenirdis, wore the wristlet that allowed the wearer to see through illusion, to lift the magical mists that cloaked the island of Kerma and to discern the portal to the sacred labyrinth. She could weave and unweave spells—and any thread she spun, any fabric she wove, was a joy to gaze upon. Her spell-weaving ability also gave her insight into the way words were woven together to produce language.

It took the power of all three bracelets used together to open the way into the labyrinth and the treasures it contained.

The queen raised a finger, but did not quite touch the magical wristlet. "Anyone with the Sight who saw that bracelet would know it for a thing of power," she cautioned. "Greedy men would kill to possess it!"

"And greedy women, too, doubtless," observed Taharka dryly. "Fear not, my queen. The wristlets have the power to conceal their true nature. Watch." He touched the bracelet lightly with the fingers of his left hand, closed his eyes, and

summoned its power. Tingling warmth enclosed his wrist. Taharka heard his wife gasp.

He opened his eyes, to see that his wristlet had changed. Now only a slim strip of woven grass encased his wrist, a bracelet such as a child might make in an afternoon for amusement. In the middle of the band of grass a small, flattened, hollowed-out pebble was threaded. The pebble was a common beach stone, smoothed by waves. Scratched into it were a few crude lines that, when studied from the correct angle, resembled the head of a lion.

“I did not know your bracelet could disguise itself,” the queen said.

“They all can,” the pharaoh replied. “Magic is an intrinsic part of them. But when we are given our lessons in using their powers by the priests, we are cautioned against lightly revealing them.” Taharka looked around at the palace, which stood on a rise, the first rank of the foothills leading to a ridge of mountains that nearly bisected the island, then down at Zerzura, gleaming white in the moonlight. “Of course here, in our own land, there is no need to invoke the power of disguise the wristlets bear. But out in the world, disguise will be necessary.”

Tiyy put a hand on her husband’s arm, just above his bracelet. “How long will it take you?” she asked anxiously. “I do not know…how long…” she trailed off, but Taharka knew what she was trying to say. Aniba had his good days, or even weeks, but his strength had been declining steadily. The prince might last two or three months, perhaps. He would not last six.

“I will be as swift as may be,” Taharka assured her. “It is early summer. The winds should be good. I will purchase passage on the fastest modern ship. Or perhaps I shall purchase a ship and crew. Once I am in the world, I will make the decisions necessary.”

He looked down at her. “Never doubt my love for you, or for our son. Rule our people well while I am gone, my queen.

I will think of you, and Aniba, and Amenirdis and Shabako every day. If my thoughts were birds, my queen, the skies above Zerzura would be dark with them.”

The queen managed a wan smile. “It is a brave thing you do, my husband. You are a good father.”

Taharka bent his head and kissed her, tasting salt on her lips. She responded with such fervor that it was as if he had left and just returned, victorious. When he finally pulled back, it was only to murmur endearments and reassurances as she clung to him.

When they stepped apart, at long last, Queen Tiyy’s shoulders straightened. “Fear not for our land, my husband. I will rule our people and guard our treasure until your return. This I swear.”

The pharaoh nodded. His heart was too full for words. Together, the royal couple turned and walked back into the palace, their heads high, their strides measured and steady.

Behind them, the moonlight shone down on the harbor of the Shining City. The ocean waves gleamed and glimmered, black and silver, black and silver, until they met the shore, where they curled into fists of white froth.

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Chapter One
Fair Winds and Black Ships

Jack Sparrow, first mate of the East India Trading Company merchant vessel *Fair Wind*, stood on the quarterdeck, glaring down at most of his hastily assembled crew. Beside him rested a large cask. It sloshed faintly as the brig glided over the topaz waters of the Caribbean Sea, three days out from Port Royal, Jamaica. Jack drummed his fingers on the top of the half-empty cask. “This rum,” he said, raising his voice so he could be heard over the creaking of the sails, the slap of the sea, and the rush of the wind, “is half gone. Why is the rum gone?”

The weatherbeaten faces that had been regarding him quizzically suddenly vanished as each crewman looked down, twisting his cap in hands scored by years of hard, dangerous work at sea. The men shuffled their feet on the holystoned planks of the *Fair Wind*’s weather deck. No one ventured a reply.

Jack hadn’t really expected any of the culprits to confess, and “peaching” on a mate was regarded as lowest of the low among the men, so the lack of a reply didn’t surprise him. He actually sympathized with the culprits. After all, the stolen substance was *rum*. Jack liked rum as well as any man. Well, to be truthful, better than most. But this rum was not, technically speaking, rum. It was *cargo*. He let his temper, until now held in check, rise.

“I will tell you why the rum is gone,” Jack roared. He thumped the top of the container. “This half-empty cask, which as of last night was full of rum bound for England, rum entrusted to this vessel to be carried in her hold until

we reach our destination, rum intended to be sold to the taverns and cellars of England, to slake English thirsts, is *gone* because," he paused for effect, "several members of this crew that stands before me, this same crew of misbegotten scurvy sea dogs, crept down into the hold and *drank* it!" He slapped his hand against the side of the cask where one of the staves had been pried out of alignment with the others, leaving a long, dark stain of spilled rum down the side of the container. Jack turned to the man standing beside him. Robby Greene was five years younger than Jack himself, which made him barely twenty. He was a slender but whipcord-strong youth, with a ready smile and a mop of golden curls that he kept tied back with a black ribbon. Greene, as second mate aboard *Fair Wind*, was responsible for the ship's cargo. "Mr. Greene!" Jack said. "What, in your professional opinion, is the precise word that should be applied to the action of starting this cask and subsequently drinking half of it? Of wantonly guzzling our cargo?"

Whoever had gotten to the rum had managed to bypass the locks on the entrances leading down to the holds. They'd started the cask, siphoned off the contents, drunk their fill, then re-tied the lashings binding the cargo, no doubt hoping the damage would be attributed to the rolling of the ship. Jack had barely relieved Third Mate Edward Tomlin when Robby had appeared to show him the half-emptied cask. *Devil take it*, Jack had thought, eyeing the damage. *And it had to happen on my watch….*

This was his and Robby's first voyage aboard *Fair Wind*, and this incident was the first real challenge to Jack's authority as first mate of the vessel. When he'd first reported for duty, minutes before sunrise, Jack had been looking forward to an uneventful watch. They'd taken on fresh provisions with their cargo, and this morning the cook had served him fresh fruit with his porridge. Savoring the last bite of pineapple, Jack had ambled onto the weather

deck, pleased to see that the good weather was holding. The brig was reaching across the wind, with all plain sail set. There was nothing better than the beauty of the early morning Caribbean on a vessel that was making good time.

And then some of these misbegotten louts had to go and guzzle the EITC's rum, Jack thought, disgustedly, as he waited for the second mate's response. Greene glanced at the crew, swallowed, but replied stoutly, "I'd call that stealing, Mr. Sparrow."

"Aye! *Stealing*!" Jack repeated. "The very word I had in mind, Mr. Greene! Drinking our cargo constitutes theft! Theft!" He turned back to the crew, who were mumbling and shuffling, scarcely daring to glance at one another. "And it is my unfortunate duty to discover the thief, or, in this case, thieves."

Robby murmured, "It would take at least three men to move the cask silently, Jack. Nobody from the third watch reported hearing anything. I'll change the padlocks on the hatch leading down to the hold. We can't have this happening again."

"Agreed," Jack said, dropping his voice so only Robby could hear him. "Now to determine which of these wretched, flea-infested lummoxes did the deed."

Moving with careful dignity, Jack descended the steps leading from the quarterdeck to the weather deck. The crew stepped back, muttering amongst themselves as he neared the bottom of the ladder. "Attention, you lubbers! Assemble in ranks!" Jack ordered, in scathing tones. "Toe these lines, you mangy curs! Straighten up! I want to see these lines toed!"

The crewmen surged back and forth in their ranks as they hastened to obey. Jack, standing poised on the last step but one, watched them attentively. Then silently, moving with his own unique stride, Jack slowly, deliberately paced down the lines of the ranked crewmen. His sensitive nose twitched as he passed each man, inhaling the usual

odors of stale sweat, unwashed human, tar, and salt. For four of the crewmen, there was another scent—one Jack recognized immediately. But he made no sign of his discovery, only continued his silent progress. When he finished, Jack beckoned to Robby Greene, who was waiting for him by the ladder leading to the quarterdeck. “Bring me a line,” he ordered. “Long enough to rig a dunking harness.”

“Aye, Mr. Sparrow,” Robby said, and hurried away.

With great dignity, Jack turned to face his crew. “I find that this gunwale”—he gestured at the railing a few feet away—“is seriously in need of foot polishing.” The crewmen turned their heads, clearly not grasping what Jack was talking about.

“Morton!” Jack snapped. “Step lively now! Walk me that gunwale!” He gestured at the railing. The “man” he addressed was barely seventeen. He was a good topman—and he was sober. Walking the gunwale would be child’s play to him.

“Aye, aye, Mr. Sparrow!”

Morton leapt up onto the railing; then, bare toes curving to fit the shape of the wood, he walked along the four-inch wide surface. He didn’t even bother to extend his arms for balance. When he’d reached the end of the fifteen-foot gunwale, he jumped lithely down.

Jack nodded. “Very good, Mr. Morton! I am pleased to see that not all of the crew of the *Fair Wind* are thieves!” He clapped the crewman on the shoulder as he passed him on his way down the ranks, noting that Robby now stood by the gunwale, a coiled line and harness rigged. Morton, vindicated, grinned broadly as he stepped back into ranks.

“Mr. Farmer!” Jack said, stopping before a middle-aged sailor whose balding head gleamed in the sun. “I believe you could use a bit of a constitutional. Walk me that gunwale!” Farmer stood rooted, his look one of wary disbelief mixed with general fuddlement. “NOW!” Jack roared. “Step lively!”

Farmer shuffled over to the gunwale, casting looks back over his shoulder at several of his mates, who studiously ignored him. He barely noticed when Robby fastened the harness around his midsection, and he needed a hand up to reach the railing. Swaying to the motion of the ship, arms extended, he stood there, trying to gain his balance.

“Did I not order you to walk said gunwale, Mr. Farmer?” Jack demanded, acidly.

“Aye, shur!” slurred Farmer. Raising his foot, he took a step forward, then with a yelp and a whirl of arms and legs, he fell over the side. His yell of protest ended in a tremendous splash.

Jack casually examined his dirty fingernails, while mentally counting, slowly, to twenty. Only then did he nod at Greene. “Haul him out, Mr. Greene. Bring him up halfway, then give our ruddy sot another ablution. Even without the stink of stolen rum on his breath, he was an offense to my nose.”

While the crew stood at attention, Robby did as ordered, using a block to winch the inebriated sailor part of the way up the hull, then letting him loose again. Jack stood there, covertly watching the crew’s reaction, while Farmer was dunked a total of three times.

When the drunken seaman was finally hauled back up to the railing, he was gasping for breath. Robby Greene prudently waited until he’d finished spewing seawater mixed with stolen rum before pulling him back onto the deck, with the help of Morton, hastily commandeered as an assistant. By the time Farmer lay sprawled limply on the deck, half- conscious, Jack knew he wouldn’t have to repeat the test.

“Morton, Phelps, take him below, lock him in the chain locker until he sobers up,” Jack ordered. Then he turned to the crew. “Mr. Barton—”

“Please, no, Mr. Shparrow!” the young, redhaired crewman said, clutching his cap, almost blubbering. “Don’t

make me walk it! I'll fall for sure, and I could break me neck! I drank th' rum, shur, I did, please shur…I'm sorry." He turned to one of the older crewmembers, a habitual troublemaker. Jack searched his mind for the man's name. *Anderson, that's it…*

"It were his idea!" Barton said, pointing a dirt-encrusted finger. "I didn't want to, but he—"

Anderson lurched forward. "Why you dirty—"

"Stow it!" Jack ordered, his voice cutting across theirs. "Barton, Anderson, Nelson, step forward."

Sullenly, the three remaining rum thieves shuffled out of ranks to stand before Jack. "You three and Farmer are hereby deprived of your daily rum ration for the remainder of this voyage," Jack said, his voice low and cutting. "The cost of the damaged cask will be taken out of your pay for this voyage, plus a suitable fine, to be determined by Second Mate Greene."

The three miscreants looked askance at each other. The penalty was stiff, but fair. Jack knew, however, that Captain Nathaniel Bainbridge, who was still reposing in his cabin, would demand even harsher penalties. Even though *Fair Wind* was a merchant vessel, it wasn't unknown for Bainbridge, a half-pay naval officer, to treat his men as though they were in the service and use the cat on their backs. Jack knew that if he didn't order a significant enough penalty, Bainbridge would have the four of them out here on the weather deck, stripped to the waist, and seized to the shrouds for flogging. Jack had no intention of ordering lashes. He knew only too well that crews had mutinied and turned pirate in these waters on far less provocation. *Dunking will serve*, Jack decided. *I'll give them all a good sluicing, and then confine them in the chain locker for the rest of the day. Bainbridge should consider that sufficient.…*

Jack had just opened his mouth to begin that order, when a shout floated down from the topman poised on the foremast. "Sail ho!"

Everyone turned. Jack quickly strode forward, shading his eyes against the brilliant sun, squinting up at the topman. His heart quickened. He was back in the Caribbean—the Spanish Main. There were many pirates plying their trade in these waters. Even the infamous rogue pirates, who had been flying their red no-quarter flag for upward of six years now, tended to go after the rich pickings in the Caribbean. Jack glanced at Robby, who was standing beside him, and saw that he was thinking the same thing. Both he and Greene had history with the rogues—history they'd like to forget, but couldn't. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Jack shouted, "Where away?"

The topman, a lad of no more than sixteen, pointed and shouted, in a strong North Country accent, "Two points for'ard of the starboard beam. Almost in the wind's eye."

Jack nodded, then turned and dashed up the ladder to the quarterdeck, heading for the binnacle. From the shelf behind it, he grabbed his spyglass in its leather carrying case, then headed back down the ladder to the foremast, the mast closest to the bow. Robby was already waiting for him, and reached out to take the spyglass case, but Jack shook his head. "I'm going aloft myself."

In preparation for the climb, Jack took off his neat, sober tricorne hat, then his long, snuff-colored coat. Beneath it he wore a loose-sleeved shirt and a waistcoat. Leaning over, one hand bracing himself against the roll of the ship, Jack pulled off his brown shoes with the big silver buckles, then he stripped off his knee stockings. The deck planks were warm against the soles of his feet, still calloused from his days as an able seaman. He'd been a topman, working high in the rigging, making sail high above the deck. Jack bundled up his clothes and handed them to Robby. "Watch my effects, please, Mr. Greene."

"Aye, Mr. Sparrow," Robby said.

Slinging the spyglass case on its leather strap over his shoulder, Jack walked over to the windward gunwale on the

starboard side, hopped up on the railing, then started up the ladderlike ratlines. The wind pushed gently against his back, and the lines were harsh against his feet and hands. He climbed steadily, not looking down, ignoring the way the ratlines swayed with the roll of the ship, and gave slightly beneath his weight. He'd done this thousands of times before, in fair weather and foul. Furling sails in the teeth of a fierce squall was one of the most dangerous jobs aboard a ship.

He paused halfway to his goal to breathe, after pulling himself over the side of the "top," the small platform above the futtock shrouds. As he caught his breath, he looked out over the water. The color of the Caribbean Sea was unlike any other body of water he'd ever sailed—and he'd sailed a lot of them. The Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, and Aegean seas, the Black Sea, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, even the Coral Sea lapping the shores of New Holland on the opposite side of the world.

Jack had spent most of his life at sea, and he loved it. Automatically, he glanced at the eastern sky, smiling faintly to see that horizon clear of any threatening clouds. Squalls could come up with amazing speed. No matter what else they were doing, sailors kept an eye on the weather.

Leaning back, he grabbed the foretopmast shrouds and began going up hand over hand, letting his legs dangle over thin air. He was winded again by the time he reached the crosstrees where the topman perched. Jack glanced over at him, searching his memory for the lad's name. *Barnes? That's not it…Bates! Yes, Bates.*

"Good sighting, Mr. Bates," Jack said, hooking a leg over the cross-trees to secure himself.

Bates flushed with pleasure. He was a stocky lad, his chin still downy, who wore a scarf wrapped around his head to protect it from the sun. "Thankee, Mr. Sparrow," he replied. "She be right over there." He pointed.

Jack took out his spyglass, focused it, and searched the sea to windward. He had to brace himself hard against the rolling of the ship and the movement of the sails in order to hold the brass cylinder steady, but that was second nature to him, and he wasn't even conscious that he was doing so. After a minute of searching the waves, the ship swam into his view. He adjusted his focus and studied her. He was looking at her in profile. She was heading south, not toward them.

Jack made out three masts. *A full-rigged ship…* He focused the spyglass again. "Probably eight miles away," he muttered. A frigate. Not a cargo vessel like the heavily laden *Fair Wind*. She was good-sized, probably four to five hundred tons burthen—which made her twice as large as *Fair Wind*. Frigates were built for speed, and war. This was probably a Royal Navy vessel. Black hull…that wasn't unusual. But her rigging…there was something familiar about her rig. *Bloody hell! It can't be…*

He lowered the spyglass. His heart was pounding, and not because of this climb up the rigging. He tried to reassure himself. *I must be imagining it.* He rubbed his eyes hard on the sleeve of his shirt, then raised the spyglass again. The stranger swam in his vision for a second, then he could see her, more clearly than ever. Her white sails gleamed in the sun. Her masts were strongly raked, to lend her speed. Her bowsprit was steeved almost level, giving her larger headsails.

Jack sucked in his breath. *A Blackwall frigate…Oh, no…* He looked again at the ship, trying to see if she had a red stripe just above her waterline, above and below her gunports, and red gunwales. But she was still too far away to make out those details. She wasn't flying any flag, but that wasn't unusual. *Fair Wind* wasn't flying her ensign either. Flags were expensive, and wore out quickly when exposed to the elements. Ships usually hoisted their colors

only when they expected to come alongside for a visit, to exchange news, or perhaps supplies.

Or when they're in pursuit, because they're pirates....

Pirate ships were usually much smaller than this vessel. He'd only ever known of one pirate who had "acquired" a frigate. But the more he saw her, the more certain he became. He'd seen this ship before and she was no naval vessel.

Jack Sparrow lowered his spyglass as memory rushed back, to the day he'd first seen this particular ship....

Shipwreck Island was a legend on the Spanish Main. The stories held that it had been an impregnable pirate stronghold and sanctuary for hundreds, nay, thousands of years. Most seafarers who heard of it regarded it as nothing more than the rum-soaked invention of tale-spinning pirates. A chimera…a myth.

The island was, however, quite real. Real, that is, in the sense that pirates who knew of it could usually find it… though not always. The island's position was difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint on a map. Some said that it had no fixed location, but that it…moved. Others laughed at this contention, but, on pain of torture unto death, refused to point out its coordinates.

One of the few pirate maps that bore correct (at least at some times) coordinates for Shipwreck Island showed it as lying a day's sail off the northeast coast of South America. Any ship chancing upon it could sail all the way around it, and unless the captain knew where to look, it would seem like nothing but a gigantic solid stone mountain rising out of the sea—a stubby, flattened mountain without a peak.

This mountain, however, was not solid. Long, long ago it had been a volcanic hell spewing lava up out of the sea. But the lava was long gone, and now the volcano lay dormant, its interior hollow. That hollow interior contained a quiet,

sheltered freshwater cove that could be reached only by a narrow river that twisted and turned its way through the southern rock wall. The opening to the outside lay beneath a shadowed overhang of rock—difficult to spot even when a navigator knew to look for it. Many ships had passed it by, never realizing there was a way in. A small band of defenders could hold off an attack on the entrance, and there were cannons mounted on outcrops of the exterior cliffs. Even the most determined attacker learned quickly that Shipwreck Cove was basically impregnable.

Sometimes the winds would sweep along the tunnel in such a way that a ship could sail into, or out of, Shipwreck Cove. When there was no wind, captains dispatched crews in longboats to tow their vessels to the docks surrounding Shipwreck City.

Shipwreck City—the pirate sanctum—had been built on a small island in the center of the cove. No one knew precisely how old the city was, though legend had it that its foundations, now hidden, consisted of Greek triremes, Roman galleys, and dragon-prowed longships. The city was constructed of ship hulks; dozens, perhaps as many as a hundred of them, piled atop one another, rising into a ramshackle tower of both new and ancient wood. At night the lights from the ships made the unwieldy structure resemble a jagged glass tube crammed full of fireflies. Bows and sterns and ancient spars protruded, giving the city an eerie quality, as snippets of pirate chanteys rose into the still night air of the caldera. Each ship that had been chosen to become part of Shipwreck City had its own story—though in most cases those stories were long lost to the dust of history or myth.

Shipwreck City did not live by clocks, or even by day and night. At any time, one could find taverns, brothels, pubs, gaming houses, or combinations of all three open and doing a lively business.

Three quarters of the way up the tower of ships, what had once been the Spanish treasure galleon *Our Lady of Divine Inspiration* (some witty pirate had modified this to “Our Lady of Divine Inebriation”) had been converted into a tavern that was publicly known as The Drunken Lady.

One hot afternoon in midsummer, with all of The Drunken Lady’s ports opened wide to catch any possible breezes, Jack Sparrow and his companion, Christophe-Julien de Rapièr, captain of the pirate vessel *La Vipère*, sat drinking rum and playing Hazard.

Jack had long ago removed his coat and battered tricorne. He blotted sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, then blew on his dice, shook them vigorously in the little cup, blew on them again and tossed them onto the table. They bounced, spun, and rolled to a stop. Jack winced. His companion laughed gleefully, while scooping up the pieces of eight. “I win again, Jacques! It is my day, not yours!”

“He who wins the day must buy the drinks,” Jack said, holding out his tankard to show it was empty. “It’s traditional.”

His companion laughed. “Another Jack Sparrow tradition. Why is it they always involve rum?” He waved to the barkeep. “Etienne! More rum!”

The barkeep, an enormous, hulking figure of an Englishman, rolled his eyes as he poured. “Don’t give me any of yer furrin’ jabber, Christophe,” he cautioned, moving toward his customers with the halting stride caused by his injured left leg and hip. “It’s *Steve*. ’Tis a good English name, good enough for me dad, and sure as the devil, good enough for me. I’ll thank ye to remember it.” He plunked the tankards down on the scarred tabletop.

Christophe chortled as he raised his drink. “But Etienne rolls so beautifully off the tongue, *mon ami*!”

Young Sparrow had first met de Rapièr when Jack was a mere stripling. The captain was the youngest man to command a pirate ship Jack had ever met. He was in his

early thirties, Jack's senior by more than a decade, and he was a dashing figure of a pirate. He was taller than Jack, with curling black hair, flashing dark eyes, and a rakish moustache and beard. He was always meticulously groomed, and a good portion of his share of *La Vipère*'s spoils went toward his wardrobe. At the moment, despite the heat, he was tricked out in a crimson coat with silver and blue embroidery, a blue waistcoat beneath it. His breeches were also blue, and his tall boots, with their folded-over tops, were custom-made from the finest Spanish leather.

Lace-trimmed ruffles frothed from his sleeves and throat like the whitest of seafoam. At the moment he was relaxing, so his black leather baldric with its silver buckle was slung over the back of his chair. His sword was Toledo steel, the guard and pommel chased with gold and silver.

At the moment, Christophe's handsome features were slackened slightly by the amount of rum he'd consumed, but Jack knew he could probably still defeat most of the denizens of Shipwreck City in a swordfight.

Jack envied his friend's skill with a sword. Two months ago Christophe had volunteered to give him lessons, and the younger man had been quick to accept. The older pirate proved to be a good, if exacting, instructor, and Jack could already tell his own technique was better.

Christophe drained his tankard, and plunked it down. "Steve!" he shouted. "More rum! And don't serve me yourself, you big lout of an Englishman, send your sweet little French wife!"

Scowling, Steve Seymour collected their tankards and refilled them. For a moment Jack thought the barkeep might refuse the pirate captain's order, but Christophe was well known for being generous to an attractive serving wench. Gruffly, he called, "Marie!"

Moments later, Steve's wife appeared. Marie Seymour was as petite as Steve was large, with soft brown hair,

pretty features, and a pleasant voice. In sharp contrast to the other women of Shipwreck City, she wore a gray-blue dress with a modest neckline and long sleeves. A long white apron tied at her waist accented her slender figure. Carrying the tankards over, she placed them before Jack and Christophe with a smile. “Your drinks, *messieurs*. Will there be anything else?”

For a moment Jack thought that Christophe would make a vulgar suggestion, but instead the captain smiled and took out a coin. “There you go, *m’amie*,” he said. “Something for your trouble.”

The early afternoon sunlight, shining through the stern windows, picked up the gleam of gold. Marie’s eyes widened, then she took the doubloon and bobbed a curtsy. Flustered, she murmured. “*Merci beaucoup, m’sieur*,” and curtsied again. Clutching the coin, she backed away. “*Merci, merci*…”

Jack gave his companion an incredulous glance. “A doubloon for a barmaid?”

Christophe laughed, his dark eyes holding a glint of mockery. “Why not?” he asked. “It pleased me to share my treasure.”

If Jack had been a fox, his ears would have pricked up. “Treasure?” He knew Christophe was baiting him, but he couldn’t sit still and let the remark pass. No decent pirate could.

The captain laughed and waggled a finger at Jack. “Do you think I will give away all my secrets? I came upon this little…hoard…of Spanish gold last month. They were old coins. Probably came from some mission along the coast where some *Padre* concealed them against attack, and died before he could reveal their whereabouts. Not a large chest, no.” He made a smallish shape with his hands. “But it was worth our trouble to acquire it, *mon ami*.”

“You got it from a Spanish vessel?”

“*Oui*. Along with a respectable take of silver ingots and some very fine tobacco.” Christophe smiled. “They put up a good fight, those Spaniards. One must respect them for it.”

Jack nodded. He didn’t much care for fighting. It was much safer, not to mention more challenging, to gain a prize by outwitting an opponent. The idea of treasure hunting had always appealed to him, and he’d had some experience at it, in his younger days. “For a moment there, I thought you’d stumbled onto the lost treasure of the Incas,” he joked. “You know, the one that Pizarro, in his arrogance, lost.”

Christophe didn’t have Jack’s knowledge of history. “Pizarro? Those Spaniards! Always losing their treasure,” he said, with an impatient wave. “What I’d like to lay my hands on would be the Treasure of Cortés.”

Jack managed not to roll his eyes. “You and every other buccaneer for the last hundred and fifty years,” he said. “Nobody knows what happened to it. Even Captain Ward didn’t record any legends concerning it.”

“Who is this Captain Ward?” Christophe asked. “And what treasures did he record?”

“I’m surprised no one has translated the book,” Jack said. “It was published in England about fifteen years ago. Sold very well, I gather. *My Lyfe Amonge the Pyrates*, by Capt. J. Ward. Teague gave me his copy to read when I was just a lad. In one of the chapters Captain Ward regales the reader with tales of treasures from all the pirates he encountered. Some of the legends go way back, hundreds, even a thousand or more years.”

“*Sacre Dieu!* I must find myself a copy of this book!” said Christophe. “Which is your favorite legend, *mon ami*?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Jack mused for a moment, then brightened. “There’s the one about the island that sank beneath the waves because the streets were paved with gold. Or, wait? Am I mixing them up?” He ruminated for a moment. “Actually, it’s rather a nuisance when everything turns into all one thing. One time in New Orleans, I—” Jack

stopped himself just in time. It didn't pay to babble about magical adventures.

Christophe blinked at him a bit owlishly. "I heard about that one," he said. "They said it sank beneath the waves because it was cursed."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Of course it did. There's always a bloody curse, isn't there? Why do so many treasures have bloody curses associated with them, anyway?" He swirled the last of his rum in his cup and then drank, feeling the sweet fire course down his gullet.

Christophe grimaced. "Surely there are some without curses, *mon ami*?"

"Oh, sure," Jack agreed. "Lessee…there was a big haul of Viking gold they say is buried up there on the coast of some land of ice." He shivered. "Don't much like cold, me. I'd rather stay down here in the Caribbean. And there are tales of treasures on magical isles in England and Ireland. Glastonbury, Camelot, Avalon, that sort of thing."

"But England is a long sail away, Jacques. By the time we reached it, the leaves would have fallen, and the weather would be miserable," Christophe pointed out. "Rain, rain, nothing but cold, wet rain. Something closer to hand would suit us. Ah, I have it! They say Henri Morgan robbed a Spanish monastery of a gold cross and chalice." Christophe traced a pattern in spilled rum on the tabletop. "The monastery was located somewhere on the coast of Panama. We could go after that, Jacques."

Jack waved his empty cup; Marie hurried forward to fill it again. "I dunno, mate. Robbing churches—that'd be tempting fate. Might as well mess with a curse, eh? No, I'd rather stick to digging up buried treasure or finding some ancient tomb or something. They say the pharaohs were all buried with heaps of gold and gems. Picture us finding some old pharaoh's final resting place."

"*La Vipère* has too much draft to make it up the Nile, Jacques," Christophe pointed out, smiling and winking at

Marie as she refilled his cup. He had perfect teeth, Jack noted sourly. Jack was a good dozen years younger, and already had a gold tooth. Life just wasn't fair. "Besides… didn't those Egyptian priests have magical powers? You want to talk about curses, *mon ami*…" Christophe trailed off and took a long swig.

"Oh, right," Jack said. "That's true. No Egyptian tombs, then." He thought for a moment. "They say the Templars hid tons of treasure. They say it would take a fleet of ships to haul it all away. And they say they had several caches of it. There are hidden treasure maps and ciphers and such." Jack sat back, ruminating. "They set traps to deter thieves. Some of those traps were mechanical. But others…" he ran his tongue along the edge of his cup, to catch the last drop of rum. "Other traps were unnatural. Magical guardians, undying sorcerers…like that." He sighed. "I bloody well *hate* those magical undying sorcerers, mate. They can take all the fun out of a treasure quest."

Christophe threw back his handsome head and laughed uproariously. "Listen to us! We must be drunker than usual, *mon ami*! Talking seriously of magic! Next thing you know, we'll be discussing making love to sirens and mermaids!"

Jack managed a laugh, but it wasn't a hearty one. He'd been exposed to magic—and mermaids, sirens, ghosts, sorcerers, and sea monsters—too many times as a lad to scoff at them now. *I ought to introduce you to Tia Dalma*, he found himself thinking. *She'd set you straight, mate, and right quickly, too…*

But he said nothing. Tia Dalma was not someone you spoke of lightly. Jack could feel the slight bump within the waistband of his breeches where he always stored the compass she'd given him. But that, too, was something he never spoke of, much less revealed. In its own way, it, too, was a treasure.

He found himself thinking of one of his favorite legends. Pirates spoke of it sometimes, and it was mentioned in

Captain Ward's book. Jack dug dirt from beneath his thumbnail, then looked up at Christophe. "Ever hear of the Legend of Zerzura? The Shining City?"

Christophe frowned slightly. "Sounds familiar, *mon ami*. Somewhere near *Afrique, non*?"

"That's right. Off the coast of Africa, they say. On an island called Kerma. It's one of those places that can't be seen by mortal sight. Hidden from view by magic, illusion, that sort of thing."

Christophe's brow furrowed. "Treasure?" he asked after a moment, recalling what was, after all, the most important thing.

"Indubitably," Jack said. He was proud of himself for pronouncing every syllable with perfect clarity.

"Ah!" Christophe perked up considerably. "Gold?"

"Heaps of it," Jack assured him. "But that's not the most important treasure. There's this labyrinth, y'see—"

Christophe excitedly pounded his fist onto the table, knocking over his cup. Fortunately, it was empty. "*Zut alors*! I'll bring a wheelbarrow. Or a mule. Or both!"

"Good idea," Jack said, dryly. "As I was saying, about this labyrinth…if you can get through it, through the illusions and magical pitfalls, when you reach the center, that's where the best swag is. Silver…gold…jewelry and coins…but the greatest treasure there, you could hold in your two hands." He held his hands cupped, not quite touching each other. "It's at leash…er, least…this big."

"What is it?" Christophe demanded, his black eyes gleaming.

"The Heart of Zerzura. It's a jewel…but not just a jewel. It's a shor—er, source of tremendous magical power. It's the source of all the power that keeps the island hidden. It rests in the hands of some heathen god, they say. An ape-god…" Jack frowned. "No, wait. Not an ape. A kitty cat?" He waved his hand dismissively. "Never mind that now. We'll know it when we see it."

“A kitty cat god is there? Holding a magical something? On an island that nobody can find?” Christophe was frowning and shaking his head. “That doesn’t sound—”

Before the pirate captain could finish his comment, there came a scream of rage, and the meaty sound of a punch. Jack and Christophe, moving with commendable speed for two men who had consumed as much rum as they had, sprang out of the way as a large pirate landed between them, smashing their table to flinders. Christophe barely had time to scoop the coins out of the way before the impact, while Jack saved the half-full bottle of rum.

It took Steve the barkeep several seconds to limp over to the still-upright combatant, grab him, and hoist him howling off the floor; then pivoting, the huge man pitched the brawler through the large, open port that, fortunately, overhung the cove. There followed a diminishing scream, then a faint splash. Steve stood regarding the unconscious pirate lying amid the remains of the Hazard table. “Who started it?” he asked, belatedly.

Several onlookers hastily volunteered that the aggressor had already been dealt with. Steve grunted, then matter-of-factly splashed half a bucket of seawater on the recumbent pirate, who sat up groggily. He was hauled to his feet and assisted out of the tavern by his friends.

Christophe resumed his seat, and looked at Jack over the remains of their table. “So…where were we?”

Jack shrugged. “Haven’t the faintest…oh. Yes. We were on the Lost Island of Kerma, making our way toward the giant gemstone of power. Figuratively speaking, of course,” he added absently, looking around for his chair.

Christophe nodded. “When you described it, I remembered. There’s something in the legend about how you have to have a talisman so you can open the entrance to the labyrinth, *oui*?”

Jack nodded, impressed. Christophe often tended to be a lot smarter—and more sober—than he let on. “That’s it,

mate. What I couldn’t think of earlier. Talisman. A ring?” He scowled down at the rum bottle in his hand, cogitating, then absentmindedly righted his chair, sat down in it, and took a long pull from the bottle. He handed it to Christophe.

The rum proved a memory charm. Jack snapped his fingers. “No, not a ring. But round. A bracelet! That’s it. Yes, there’s a talisman in the shape of a bracelet. It’s got the kitty cat god’s head on it.”

“Bien! We shall go find this island! When shall we set sail, *mon ami*?”

Jack opened his mouth to shout “Tomorrow!” but then shut it as memory struck. Teague! Of course it would be Teague who would spoil his plans! Jack scowled.

Captain Teague had mentioned a few days ago that he expected Jack to set sail with him, and that they’d be leaving in a week. Teague wanted to sail north to investigate the rumors of rogue pirates wreaking havoc on merchant ships of all countries, both in the Atlantic and the Pacific. At first when Teague, as Keeper of the Code, had heard that the Royal Navies of several countries were beginning to escort merchant convoys to protect them against ruthless rogue pirates, he’d been inclined to dismiss the rumors.

But as time went by, the rumors continued and grew more numerous. It had been a full six months since Shipwreck Cove had first heard tales about rogue pirates callously slaughtering both crew and passengers without provocation. Only a scant handful of survivors had managed to escape death by playing dead.

The rogues were reported to fly the black skull and crossbones, plus a red flag that sported a demon’s horned head. Traditionally, a red flag flown by naval vessels promised a fight to the finish in wartime. But for pirates the tradition was different. Flying a red flag signaled “no quarter” to any ship’s crew that resisted, but guaranteed the safety of all aboard if the ship surrendered without a fight. These rogues did not follow that tradition. What they

wrought was wholesale butchery, wanton murder, even toward ships that surrendered without firing a shot. This behavior was in direct violation of the Code. It was Teague's responsibility, as Keeper of the Code, to investigate. And he expected Jack to accompany him.

Heading for Africa with Christophe sounded like a much more interesting way to spend the next few months than sailing around aimlessly looking for ships sporting red demon flags. Jack sighed. "I'd love to, mate. But…" he turned his head to gaze out the open port, deliberately keeping his features from betraying his thoughts. His relationship with the Keeper of the Code was…complicated. On one hand, Jack Sparrow longed for nothing more than to be free of Teague and his orders forever. On the other hand, he wished that before he departed forever, he could, for once, gain the captain's respect. "You really mean it? I can join your crew?"

"But of course!" Christophe assured him, and then upended the bottle to polish off the last of the rum. "No doubt there would be many ships we could take in between here and *Afrique*. Ivory, gold, black gold…*Afrique* is a rich hunting ground for the wolves of the sea."

Black gold? Jack wondered. *Oh. He means slaves. I want no part of that…*

Jack opened his mouth, not knowing exactly what he was going to say, but was saved from having to compose a remark when his eye caught a glimpse of movement out the port. He swung around to look. A ship was coming into the cove from the tunnel through the mountain, a good-sized frigate that was as graceful and trim as any he'd seen. Hastily, Jack beckoned Christophe to join him. Together they stood looking down, watching her arrive at the dock. Her sails hung limp in the midday heat, so she was being towed by two longboats. "I've never seen her like, except those built for the Royal Navy," Jack said, marveling. "A frigate…a

bloody frigate! And not just any frigate, a Blackwall frigate! They can sail rings around most ships."

"*Mon Dieu*, so she is! Let us go welcome this pirate who has managed to acquire for himself such a beautiful ship!"

"I'm with you," Jack said. His curiosity was fully aroused. Scooping up his effects, he followed Christophe out of The Drunken Lady, and into the crazy-angled, many-leveled passageways that connected the piled-up ships. Experienced as they were at navigating the intricate, twisting byways of Shipwreck City, it still took the pirates nearly twenty minutes to work their way down the tower of heaped ships to dock level. By the time they emerged into the sun, the frigate was being tied up at the dock. Jack strode out of the shadow of Shipwreck City, tugging his coat into place, then running a hand over his unkempt hair before clapping his tricorne on his head. Squinting in the sun after the gloom of the passageways, he saw the frigate's name painted on her bow: *Venganza*.

As Jack and Christophe started along the quay, heading for the dock where *Venganza* was now berthed, an imposing figure in a foppish coat and beplumed hat stepped out from a knot of onlookers ahead of them and started up the dock toward the ship. Jack hesitated, then stumbled, nearly falling. Christophe grabbed his elbow. "Too much rum, *mon ami*?"

Jack flushed, and was glad for the shadow of his hat and his deep tan. "I'm fine," he said curtly, shaking off his friend's grasp.

But his strides shortened. He didn't want to meet up with Teague. Somehow, Edward Teague, Pirate Lord and Keeper of the Code, had a knack for making Jack feel young and foolish. He wasn't sure just how Teague managed it, but he'd experienced it many times. His eyes narrowed, and he squared his shoulders. *Damn it. I'm not going to let him control where I go or what I do!*

Jack's strides lengthened until he had almost caught up with Christophe. Ahead of them, a gangplank had been slid into place, so *Venganza*'s crew could move easily between ship and dock.

Ahead of them, Captain Teague stopped, and raised his voice to be heard over the everyday bustle of the docking area. "Ahoy, *Venganza*!"

Jack heard another voice, fainter, coming from the frigate. "Ahoy, Captain Teague! The Pirate Lord of the Caribbean presents his compliments!" Jack frowned, searching his memory. That was…Don Rafael. Yes. He'd seen him years ago, when he was about nine, and remembered a burly, weathered Spaniard with iron-gray hair. The Pirate Lord had been accompanied by his granddaughter, Esmeralda, a short, chubby brat six years older than Jack. One time Jack had teasingly yanked her thick black braid, and she'd pounced on him and given him a thrashing that had left him bruised for days.

Jack scowled at the memory.

He had just stepped onto the dock where *Venganza* was now moored, when a heap of rags thrown against a barrel suddenly stirred, and stood up. "Jack Shparrow!" the rags exclaimed. "You owe me fourteen sh-shillings! Pay up!"

Jack groaned inwardly. Christophe snickered. Jack looked closer at the rag-man and realized he knew him. "Baldy" Malone. And yes, Jack did owe him money. But, thanks to Christophe, his purse was now as empty as it had been that night at the gaming table. Jack essayed a friendly smile. "Baldy!" he exclaimed. "What a coincidence! I was just on my way to meet up with a mate that owes me twenty shillings. And the very next thing on my list was to come find you and settle up. Before you can dance a jig, mate, I'll be back with the money."

Baldy had obviously been sleeping off a bender, and he hadn't slept nearly long enough to even glimpse sobriety. He stood there, swaying slightly, his already wrinkled brow

wrinkling even further as he attempted to follow what Jack had told him. After several seconds, he abandoned the attempt. Fumbling in his purse, he pulled out Jack's marker and waved it at him. "You owe me, Shpaarrow! Pay up!"

Jack glanced over at Christophe, wondering if he could get the money from his friend, but Christophe was turned away, studying the frigate's clean lines and her graceful rigging. "Sorry, mate," he told Baldy, "you'll have to wait. I don't have it at the moment."

Baldy glared at Jack out of bloodshot eyes, then drew his dagger. "Then I'll take it out of your hide!" He lurched toward the younger man.

Smoothly, Jack stepped back, drawing his cutlass as he did so. With a practiced flick of his wrist, he separated the dagger from its owner, and sent it soaring into the air. The weapon spun silver in the sunlight, then splashed into the water of the cove and sank with scarcely a ripple.

Baldy stood looking at his empty hand for long seconds as though he couldn't believe the weapon was gone. Jack sheathed his weapon. "Sorry, mate," he said. "Listen, I really will get you your money. Just a temporary shortage, I assure—"

He broke off as Baldy, with a howl that would have done credit to a rabid wolf, launched himself at him, hands outstretched and reaching for Jack's throat. Jack carefully clipped the old pirate on the jaw as he stepped aside, expecting him to fold up into a heap again, but he'd miscalculated the amount of rum Baldy had ingested. The man never even felt the blow. He changed the angle of his charge and came on.

Time to end this, Jack thought. He knew Christophe was laughing at him, and he didn't even want to think about Teague's reaction. As Baldy rushed forward, Jack punched the old pirate in the stomach—hard.

This time, Baldy folded up. Grabbing his midsection, he bent double—and spewed used rum and food all over the

dock. Jack danced backward, but he was just a fraction of a second too late to save his boots. Baldy's inundation splashed all over them.

Jack stared down at his feet in consternation as Baldy slumped to the rough wood of the dock and lay still. Christophe dissolved into laughter. Jack felt heat in his face that had nothing to do with the fierce sun beaming overhead. He stood there, looking around desperately for a handy bucket of water, but none appeared. "Ah, Jacques!" gasped Christophe, after his initial fit of hilarity had passed. "You should have seen the look on your face, *mon ami*!"

Jack scowled. For a second he was tempted to kick the unconscious Baldy into the water. "Go ahead," Christophe urged him, reading his mind. "Why not?"

Jack's mouth tightened and he shook his head. The old pirate was out cold. If he pushed him into the water, there was a good chance Malone would drown without regaining consciousness. After a second Jack stepped over to his recumbent attacker and managed to wipe his boots off on some of the rags that served the old pirate for clothing.

When he looked back up after finishing, it was to see Christophe at the end of the dock, doffing his hat with a gallant sweep and bowing with a grace worthy of the court of King Louis. Jack recognized Don Rafael as he stepped down from the gangplank, and then turned and offered his hand to…

Jack blinked. She was standing there, staring straight at him and it was obvious from her expression that she'd seen the entire incident. *Esmeralda?* Jack thought, blankly. *But…it can't be. She's…beautiful.*

The young woman who stood there gazing at Jack with an amused expression was dressed in the height of fashion. Her gown and hat were of rose-colored satin trimmed with ivory lace, and the color set off her olive skin and black hair perfectly. She hadn't grown any taller; she was still petite. But her figure could no longer be termed "chubby." Her

gown, though modestly cut, revealed curves that made Jack determined to go over and greet her. He watched as Don Rafael assisted his granddaughter down the gangplank. As Esmeralda stepped onto the dock, she turned her attention to Christophe, who bowed over her hand, then kissed it. Esmeralda smiled at the Frenchman. Jack scowled.

With all his being he wanted to go over there, to bow over her hand every bit as gracefully as Christophe had. But he reeked of used rum. And despite his best efforts, there were still streaks of puke on his boots.

Jack turned with a jerk and strode away, back down the dock. As he passed the unconscious Baldy Malone, he aimed a furious kick at the old pirate's bare pate, but his foot didn't…quite…connect.

"Mr. Sparrow?"

The voice jerked Jack out of his memories. He blinked, and was back in the present. "Yes, Bates?"

"Can you make out what kind of ship she be, sir?"

Jack sighed. "I fear she's a Blackwall frigate, lad," he said. "Twenty-eight guns, and fast enough to sail rings around us."

"Royal Navy, Mr. Sparrow?"

Jack shook his head. "I don't believe so, Mr. Bates. I'm going to change course to west northwest. Prepare yourself."

"Aye, Mr. Sparrow!"

Jack climbed back down, hardly even thinking about what he was doing, his mind filled with course corrections and orders. When he reached the deck, he hastily donned his cast-off coat, stockings, shoes, and hat.

Then, cupping his hands around his mouth, he bellowed, "All hands on deck!"

The deck began filling with sailors, including the ones rousted out of their hammocks by Robby Greene and the

third mate. Jack waited until most of the crew was present, then shouted, “All hands to the braces!” As the sailors scattered, he went up the ladder leading to the quarterdeck in a rush. When the helmsman on watch turned to him, he ordered, “Mr. Richards, new course, steer west northwest.”

Crooking his finger at the cabin boy, who was up on the weather deck, watching the activity, Jack beckoned. When young Tim joined him on the quarterdeck, he spoke softly. “Tim, my compliments to Captain Bainbridge. Convey to him we’re changing course and that I request his presence on deck as soon as possible. Step lively, now.”

The lad nodded and raced down the ladder, bare feet slapping against the deck planks. Jack watched him go. He knew it was unlikely that Bainbridge would hurry. The older man was very fond of his port, and tended to drink until after midnight. He’d be hard to rouse. Jack squinted into the distance, where he could barely make out what might be a sail with his unaided vision, and sighed. And the day had started so promisingly, too!

Fair Wind had been sailing nearly due north. Jack’s orders set the helm and the sail crew to changing course by nearly ninety degrees, so *Fair Wind* showed the strange sail her heels. It took a quarter of an hour for the brig to complete the turn and settle to her new heading.

When the brig was on her new course, Jack ordered his men into the rigging to put on every possible rag of sail. *With any luck*, he thought, *she just took a big prize and her holds are full of spoil. With any luck, the crew’s been celebrating with stolen spirits, and most of them are sleeping it off, and they won’t notice us. With any luck, we can slip away before she even knows we were here….*

While the crew worked busily, swarming up and down the rigging, and the t’gallants began to billow with wind, Jack paced the deck impatiently.

By the time all new sails were set, more than half an hour had passed since he’d first spotted the frigate’s sails.

Spyglass in hand, Jack went aft to check on the other ship. He could see her clearly now, still on her previous course. He let out a breath of relief. Then, as he watched from the stern, his jaw tightened.

The outlines of the frigate's sails were shortening as she altered direction, turning…turning west. There could be no mistake. The Blackwall frigate was altering course, heading straight for *Fair Wind*.

Jack groaned softly. Even with a good head start, the chances of the heavily laden *Fair Wind* outrunning the other vessel were slim to none.

Jack heard a step behind him, and turned to find Robby Greene regarding him. On seeing Jack's expression, Robby held out a hand. "Mind if I have a look, Jack?"

Jack silently handed over the spyglass. The frigate was closer now, easy to see from the taffrail. After a long moment, Robby lowered the glass, his normally good-humored features grim. "Heaven help us. Either the sun has gotten to me, or I know that vessel."

Jack Sparrow shook his head, grimly. "You're not seeing things, Robby. It's *Venganza*, and we're her quarry."

Robby sucked in an audible breath. "Of all the miserable bad luck…"

Jack nodded. "My sentiments exactly."

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Chapter Two
Lady Esmeralda

Jack turned at the sound of heavy feet thumping up the portside ladder, and saw *Fair Wind*'s captain, Nathaniel Bainbridge, heaving himself up the last step onto the quarterdeck. Robby hastily handed over the spyglass, muttering, "Good luck, Jack," then turned and headed down the starboard ladder in a rush. Seeing the expression on Bainbridge's face, Jack knew his friend was right. He braced himself. *I'm in for it now.*

Jack hadn't seen much of *Fair Wind*'s captain since they'd set sail from the brig's home port of Calabar, on the West African coast. Once Bainbridge had realized that his new first mate was a competent sailor, and, truth be told, a better navigator than he was, he'd happily turned all of his least-favored duties over to Jack—including the early morning watch. There was good reason for the captain's reluctance to face the bright sun; every night Bainbridge ate a large dinner, then spent hours in his cabin, consuming copious amounts of port. As a result, the old man was seldom seen on *Fair Wind*'s deck much before noon. As he watched the captain stump toward him, Jack figured that the captain had been enjoying his port until at least midnight. Bainbridge was squinting painfully in the bright sunlight, and his coat hung askew.

Halting before his first mate, the captain barked, "Mr. Sparrow! What is the meaning of this course change?"

"Captain, we've a vessel in pursuit," Jack said, all business. "I thought, under the circumstances, caution was indicated. Pirates sail these waters, sir." As always when he

addressed a superior, he was careful with his wording and diction. Speaking in a lower-class accent made a negative impression on the snobbish officials and officers of the East India Trading Company. At first it had been difficult for Jack to adjust his speech patterns, but over the years, it had become second nature.

Handing over his spyglass, he pointed. Despite *Fair Wind*'s best efforts, the frigate was visibly closer. It was now perhaps six or seven miles away, visible even to the naked eye. *Our top speed with this load of cargo*, Jack calculated, *is about six knots.* Venganza*'s is ten, possibly eleven, depending on what she has in her holds, and how much sail she's carrying. That means she'll catch us in...*his lips moved silently as Bainbridge raised the spyglass and scanned the horizon...*about an hour and a half. Presuming Esmeralda doesn't raise her royals as well as her t'gallants....*

Bainbridge took a long look at their pursuer through the spyglass, then handed it back to Jack, who raised it and looked again. The oncoming vessel was no longer visible in profile, but could be seen bow-on, the squares of her sails billowing like clouds. And yes, she was now rigged all the way to the top of her mast. The Lady Pirate had indeed put up her royals. *Less than ninety minutes, then. Seventy, perhaps eighty minutes...*

Jack lowered the spyglass, reluctantly, to face Bainbridge, who was regarding him silently, arms crossed. "You changed course to try to evade that ship, Mr. Sparrow?"

"Aye, sir," Jack said, stiffly. The sarcastic edge in Bainbridge's tone brought back memories of Captain Teague's scathing remarks. Teague had never actually carried out his threats to have Jack flogged, but there had been times when Jack had thought that having the cat slashed across his back might have been easier to endure than Teague's low-voiced scorn.

“Why, Mr. Sparrow?” Bainbridge asked, with exaggerated patience.

“I thought it prudent to change course and put on more sail, Captain, hoping she’d not spotted us. But it appears she has. Just a few minutes ago she changed course, and, I noted, she’s now putting on more sail. She’s in pursuit.” *And we can’t outrun her*, Jack added, silently.

“Hmmmmph!” snorted Bainbridge. Raising the spyglass, he took another long look, then handed it back. “Correct me if I am wrong, but she looks to be a British ship. A Blackwall frigate, to be exact. Am I correct?”

“Aye, sir.” Jack was glad they were alone.

“And who owns the majority of the frigates produced by the Black-wall shipyard, Mr. Sparrow?”

“The Royal Navy procures them, Captain,” Jack said, his cheeks hot.

“Exactly. So…pirates in pursuit, you say? I think not!” Bainbridge gave a short bark of unamused laughter. “The very idea!”

Jack turned his spyglass over in his hands, thinking hard. He knew the idea of a pirate having a Blackwall frigate as a vessel was indeed far-fetched. Most pirates used smaller vessels—fast, agile schooners and sloops, well-armed and heavily crewed. They were deadly against merchant vessels, but they weren’t ships that could attack and capture a frigate. Frigates were warships, and no sane pirate would tackle a twenty-eight gun frigate. Even the crazy ones—and there were more than a few—would hesitate before trying it.

Bainbridge evidently realized he’d made his point, because he cleared his throat and moderated his tone. “Mr. Sparrow, you’ve served well on this voyage, so I’m prepared to overlook your…misplaced zeal today. That ship…” he swept an arm at the frigate, “is an English vessel! She’s almost certainly Royal Navy. We should heave to, not make her chase us! She may have news from home, or she may have a crucial message to send on to England with us. She

might be in need of supplies. It's our duty as Englishmen to find out what she wants."

Jack took a deep breath. "I know it sounds unlikely, sir, but this *is* the Caribbean. I believe, Captain, that this frigate is a pirate vessel. We need to think about what to do when she catches us, in an hour or so."

Bainbridge rolled his eyes. "Mr. Sparrow, you're not listening. That ship is almost certainly a Royal Navy vessel, purchased from Blackwall shipyard. Whoever has heard of a *pirate* possessing such a ship?"

Jack thought fast, and decided to answer the Captain's question with the truth. Though of course he couldn't be candid about *how* he'd learned it. Squaring his shoulders, he replied, "I have, sir."

Bainbridge blinked his small, reddened eyes at him. "*You* have, Mr. Sparrow? You have knowledge of pirates, and their vessels? How came you by such knowledge, pray tell?"

"I…I heard about it in The Faithful Bride, Captain."

"That tavern in Port Royal? Disreputable place!" Bainbridge regarded him skeptically. "Exactly what did you hear?"

"A man told of a British naval vessel, Captain, just like that one. She'd run aground on a sandbar near the Florida Keys, and there she stayed, her sails flogged to pieces by the wind, all her boats gone. A pirate vessel came along, and found her there. The pirate captain rowed over alone to investigate the frigate. What he found was a ship of the dead, sir. The *vomito negro*, it was. What we call 'yellow jack.'"

Bainbridge couldn't repress a shudder. Stories of ships whose entire crews had succumbed to plagues of various sorts were all too well known. "Go on!" he ordered.

"The captain of this pirate ship was a Spaniard, and he'd had yellow jack when he was a lad, and survived it. They say you can't get it twice. So he assembled his crew, and demanded to know which of them had had it. He wound up

with nearly ten men to go over to the vessel to salvage her. They disposed of the bodies, cleaned up the ship, and towed her off that sandbar. Then the pirate captain took the frigate as his flagship."

"I see." Bainbridge eyed Jack suspiciously. Jack was careful to keep his expression blank. "That sounds nearly as wild a tale as ghost stories about the *Flying Dutchman*. Just who was this man who told you the tale?"

This was more difficult than he'd anticipated. Jack could feel sweat trickling down the back of his neck. "He was a rough-looking character, Captain. He never gave his name. He said he'd had the story from one of the men who salvaged the vessel." He dropped his voice to an awed whisper. "I think he may have actually been a pirate himself, sir!"

Bainbridge chuckled, vastly amused. "And you *believed* this…this tavern tale, Mr. Sparrow?"

Jack hesitated. Finally he nodded, cautiously. "The story had the ring of truth about it, sir." Jack's usual gift of being able to spin endless anecdotes couched in deliberately obfuscating language seemed to have deserted him. Almost stammering, he added, "I've no personal knowledge, of course, sir."

"Hmmmmph!" Bainbridge glared at him. "Of *course* you haven't. Look at you, a nice young well-brought-up English lad! Shame on you, Mr. Sparrow! The Faithful Bride is notorious! If your sainted mother knew you went into such an establishment, she'd…" Words failed him, and he actually shook a meaty forefinger at Jack. "Really, Sparrow! Listen to yourself! Believing drunken tavern gossip!"

Jack tried to look suitably scolded, but his mouth insisted on twitching. Any moment now he'd burst into laughter at the sheer mad irony of it all. Putting his hand over his eyes, he hung his head, assuming the most abject posture he could manage.

"I'm sorry, Captain," he managed, in a choked whisper.

“And well you should be, Sparrow,” the captain said, gruffly. “Well, brace up, lad. No real harm done, I suppose.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Jack finally got his face under control and looked back up. *I need a drink. I need many drinks, and a salty wench. Two salty wenches, and three weeks in Tortuga….*

“Oh, I’m not really faulting you, Sparrow,” Bainbridge added, with bluff heartiness. “Young, naïve, inexperienced in the ways of the world…lads like yourself tend to have rampageous imaginations. They want adventure, danger, they imagine themselves swashbucklers. So they envision peril in every new sail. But this ship that’s coming after us is one of our own, you’ll see.” Bainbridge smiled. His teeth were large, crooked and yellow. “I’m not going to fault you on this, lad, fear not. We haven’t lost much time, and it’s not a bad idea for the men to have a sail drill. Keeps ’em on their toes, it does.”

Any second now, Jack thought, *he’s going to pat me on the shoulder. And then I’ll…I’ll…*It was all he could do to keep his face blank. *This is even worse than having Teague dress me down. At least HE didn’t try to talk me to death.*

Aloud Jack said, tonelessly, “Your orders, Captain?”

“Give the order to heave to,” Bainbridge said. “We’ll wait for them, and I’ll apologize to the captain. Explain that you got a bit…overexcited.” He chuckled. “No doubt we’ll all have a good laugh about it over a glass of port in my cabin.”

For just a moment, Jack considered telling Bainbridge the whole truth. *But he probably wouldn’t believe me, and even if he did, it wouldn’t change anything. We can’t outrun her.* Revealing why he’d known *Venganza* would throw away everything he’d worked the past five years to achieve. And, knowing Robby, the lad would be at his side when he was ordered off the ship in disgrace. Robby was too loyal for his own good.

The fact that soon enough Bainbridge would realize his error was small comfort. *So start thinking about what you’ll*

do when Bainbridge realizes the truth. I wonder if I can persuade Esmeralda to negotiate on how much of our cargo she takes?

Squaring his shoulders, he headed forward to relay Bainbridge's order.

Minutes later, Jack stood on the weather deck, watching the crew hauling on the braces to back the foretops'l. Leaning over the gunwale, he shaded his eyes and watched the now rapidly closing *Venganza*. The sun was very bright. Jack closed his eyes, and found himself remembering his first real meeting with the woman who was to become known as the infamous Doña Pirata, Pirate Lord of the Caribbean....

After the unfortunate incident with Baldy Malone, Jack wasted no time in unfolding the plan that had sprung fully-formed into his mind. First, he found a Hazard game and arranged the transfer of a suitable infusion of funds from an unfortunate pirate who was not as lucky—or as skillful at cheating—as Jack was.

After he'd won enough, Jack made a side trip to the berth where *Venganza* lay, and, in his fluent, if somewhat ungrammatical, Spanish, offered a shilling to the first hand he saw in exchange for the lady's full name. As he walked back down the dock, he repeated it in his mind. *Esmeralda Maria Consuela Anna de Sevilla. A bit longish, but beautiful nonetheless.*

When he reached the end of the dock, Jack started to turn left, intending to head back into Shipwreck City. He knew where Teague would take his guests. But then he hesitated, looking down at his boots. A sudden memory of Christophe, always impeccably attired and well-groomed, taking the lady's hand in his own and kissing it, flashed into his mind.

Thoughtfully, Jack spread his own fingers, regarding them, then imagined himself taking the lady's hand.

He turned right, heading back toward *Troubadour*, Teague's vessel, where he had a berth and kept his sea chest. When he reached the ship, he got a bucket from one of the hands, filled it with fresh water from a public trough, and carried it back aboard. Careful not to splash its contents on the holystoned and scrubbed deck, he went below to his "quarters" aboard Teague's vessel—a hammock on the crew deck, and, beneath it, the small sea chest containing all his worldly possessions.

Opening the chest, he took out several rags, a sliver of soap, and some oil. First he cleaned and oiled his leather boots, his belt, and the baldric that held his cutlass. The boots took quite a while, but finally Jack was satisfied with them. Taking out a brush, he energetically brushed his best waistcoat, then his coat. He even shined the brass buttons. Then he brushed his ragged old tricorne, wishing he had one of the rakish leather ones. When he'd done the best he could with his admittedly shabby wardrobe, Jack turned his attentions to his person.

Carefully, he washed his face and hands, then, after some consideration, stripped to the waist and washed his upper body, too. After drying off, he put on his "best" shirt, the one that had no visible holes. His hair was a snarled tangle. It took a long time to comb it so it lay smoothly over his shoulders. Finally, Jack ran his fingers over his chin, feeling the bristled stubble, then made a face and sighed. Christophe was always perfectly barbered, damn his eyes. It took a while to locate and "borrow" a razor from another man's chest—most pirates sported beards—then he had to sharpen the blade. Shaving without a mirror wasn't easy, but he managed, leaving only what he firmly assured himself was a dashing moustache.

Carefully, Jack re-packed his sea chest, then carried the bucket up the ladder and tossed its black contents over the

side into the cove.

Glancing up at the sun, he realized the afternoon was now well advanced. Teague had mentioned that he planned to convene an informal meeting of the Pirate Lords currently present at Shipwreck City, to discuss the rogue pirate attacks. Now that yet another Pirate Lord, Don Rafael, had arrived, that meeting would certainly be held, probably this very afternoon. Jack couldn't picture Don Rafael turning his granddaughter loose in Shipwreck City, so Esmeralda was almost certainly with him at the meeting—which was doubtless under way.

Speeding up his usual insouciant strut, Jack climbed the labyrinthine corridors to the room Teague used for meetings of the Brethren. Located much lower in the towering pile of ships than The Drunken Lady, it was the cavernous hold of a long-derelict ship, with the ancient vessel's curving "ribs" visible. When he reached the entrance, Jack nodded at the two pirates standing guard outside. He was well known to Teague's men; they returned his nod and stood aside. Jack put his hand on the door fastening and hesitated, listening. After a few moments, he heard a woman's melodic tones. Summoning his most charming smile, he opened the door and entered.

Esmeralda was there, as he had expected, and Jack saw with relief that Christophe was not. He had an uncomfortable notion that any comparison between himself and the handsome older pirate wouldn't favor him. As he'd figured, the huge, scarred table in the center of the dimly lit chamber was mostly empty. Despite the fact that some of the hull planking was missing, leaving portions of the chamber open to the air, ship lanterns were still lit. They were hung against the wrecked hull, but did little to alleviate the gloom. The hodgepodge of wrecked ships overhung this section, blocking out most of the daylight. Teague sat at the head of the table, with Mistress Ching, Pirate Lord of the Pacific, on his left. The Spaniard, Villanueva, Pirate Lord of

the Adriatic Sea, sat to his right. Don Rafael, Pirate Lord of the Caribbean, sat next to his countryman, with his granddaughter beside him.

On the opposite side of the table, next to Mistress Ching, Boris Palachnik sat bolt upright, his scarred hands steepled before him.

“Borya” was the Pirate Lord of the Caspian Sea, and Jack had known him casually for years. He was a small, scrawny man who wore a pair of wire-framed, thick-lensed spectacles on a ribbon around his neck. His name meant “little butcher” in Russian, and the word in pirate society was that Borya had taken that name either as a joke, or to try to belie his appearance. Anyone meeting him on the street would have taken him for an undernourished clerk. His lined, weather-beaten face was thin and sharp-featured, and, despite years of living outdoors, his nose was always sunburned and peeling. Wispy gray hair stuck straight up from his pink scalp, and his beard was equally thin and patchy. In his short coat, shapeless hat, and felt boots, he was a strange figure indeed.

Nevertheless, Borya was as much a true pirate as any of his more imposing brethren. He captained a sleek, powerful sloop named *Koldunya*. When Jack was about seven, he’d asked him what that word meant, and the old Pirate Lord had smiled, revealing small, very white teeth, and replied. “Means ‘witch’ in my language. You know what ‘witch’ is? Woman who works magic, *da*?”

Jack hadn’t yet met Tia Dalma, but Teague knew some very odd people. Little Jack had nodded. “Yes, I know what that is. But aren’t witches supposed to be ugly? She’s a beautiful ship.”

Borya had smiled with pleasure at the justified compliment, and ruffled Jack’s hair. “You have good eye for ships, Jack-boy. Many ships I have had since I went ‘on the account,’ as you English put it, and all were beautiful…and all named *Koldunya*. Do you know what kind of ship she is?”

Young Jack had nodded. “Of course! She’s a Jamaica sloop. Five gun ports to a side, shallow draft, fore and aft rigged, with raked masts.”

Borya had blinked, clearly impressed. “Teague,” he’d said, “this boy, he is sharp one, he is. Won’t be long before he will be Pirate Lord himself, *da*?”

Teague, never one to praise Jack, had merely grunted in reply.

As Jack entered the meeting room, every face in the room turned to him, eyes wary. Hands felt for weapons, but then, as they recognized him, the Pirate Lords relaxed—except for the Keeper of the Code. Edward Teague’s expression darkened, then he made a discreet brushing away gesture with two fingers. The meaning was clear. *Go away*.

Jack pretended not to notice it. “Good afternoon, lovely ladies,” he said, doffing his hat and making his most elegant bow, “and esteemed gentlemen.”

A small ripple of amusement ran around the gathering. Pirates loved to be mistaken for gentry, no matter what their country of origin. It was one reason that they tended to dress expensively—if somewhat flamboyantly—when they went out in public in a “safe” place such as Tortuga, certain strongholds on the Madagascar coast, and, of course, Shipwreck Cove.

“My apologies for my tardiness,” Jack continued, smoothly. “I needed to assume more…suitable…attire.” Don Rafael chuckled goodhumoredly, Mistress Ching smiled, Villanueva laughed and saluted Jack with his wine goblet, and Borya’s teeth flashed in the dimness. Esmeralda gave him a brief, unreadable glance.

Teague’s scarred, lined features never moved, but his eyes were hard and his voice harsh. “If you must come in, Jacky boy, sit down and stop babbling.”

Ignoring him, Jack sashayed into the room, halted beside Esmeralda’s chair, then greeted Mistress Ching,

Borya, and Villanueva individually. Taking a breath, he inclined his head toward the head of the table, still without making eye contact. “And our esteemed Keeper of the Code, Captain Teague, of course,” he added.

Villanueva, who was evidently on his second or third goblet of wine, suddenly straightened up. “Jack,” he said in his heavily accented English, “that reminds me, you owe—”

Jack smiled and bowed again. “I am leagues ahead of you, my dear captain,” he said loftily, removing a small purse from inside his belt. He shook it, and it clinked. Handing it to the Pirate Lord with a flourish, he added, “and thank you so much, *Señor*. I included a bit extra to recompense you for your patience.”

Villanueva muttered his own thanks, then quickly counted the coins before stowing the little purse away.

Jack didn’t wait for the pirate to finish counting, but instead bowed slightly to Don Rafael and his granddaughter. “Mistress Ching, I see we have another gentleman and a young lady present. May I prevail upon you to provide an introduction?”

The blind old Chinese woman laughed softly. She’d always found Jack amusing. “Don Rafael, Doña Esmeralda, allow me to present to you Jack Sparrow, Captain Teague’s…” her momentary pause was hardly discernible, “protégé.”

Jack bowed again, more deeply this time, to Don Rafael, then more deeply still to Lady Esmeralda. “Captain,” he murmured, “Lady Esmeralda.”

They returned his greetings. Jack was disappointed that Esmeralda didn’t extend her hand. Nevertheless, he was now where he’d aimed to be, so he pulled out the chair next to her and sat down.

Teague sat up straighter. “Let’s return to what we were discussing before the interruption,” he said, his voice flat. “I’ve concluded that we must take action regarding these rogue pirates. If these blackguards continue to plunder and

menace merchant shipping, it won't be long before England, France, Spain, and probably Portugal will dispatch their navies to hunt down all pirate ships they find. They won't distinguish between those of us that keep to the Code, and these rogue pirates…these Code-breakers."

Borya Palachnik made a brief, slashing gesture. "Four months ago, off coast of English colony name of Virginia, we saw smoke of burning. We sail to investigate. Nothing left but burning ship, and wreckage in water. Only living thing was cabin boy clutching oar, floating on water. Child told us he escaped death only by burrowing under bodies of slain. Pah! These cowards, they not pirates, but butchers!"

Mistress Ching, who commanded a formidable fleet of her own, larger than even the Chinese Emperor's fleet, shook her head, her blind, white eyes gleaming eerily in the lantern light. "We have not seen any sign of them in the waters near the Chinese coasts," she said.

"They have been preying off the coast of Spain," Villanueva said. "And they operate as Borya has described. We have found two burning wrecks, and other ships have simply vanished like this!" Holding up his scarred right hand, he snapped his fingers.

Just then, one of Teague's retainers entered, a cashiered old pirate who bobbed his grizzled head respectfully at the gathering, then murmured softly to the Keeper. Teague nodded to him. "Ladies, gentlemen, let us continue our discussion over dinner."

The guards opened the doors, and former crewmen, too old for shipboard service, began carrying in trays of food and more goblets of wine. They bustled back and forth, as the conversation among the assembled Pirate Lords turned to more general, less confidential subjects.

Jack covertly glanced at Esmeralda, trying to catch her eye, but she was determinedly not looking at him. Realizing that she was even aware of him cheered him greatly.

Reynaldo, a former helmsman with a pronounced limp, placed a plate before him. Jack murmured his thanks, then sat poised as he slid Lady Esmeralda's plate before her. As he'd anticipated, she glanced up at Reynaldo to thank him. As her eyes met his, Jack flashed her a quick smile, and had the satisfaction of seeing her hastily look back down at her food. Unless he was mistaken in the dim light, she was blushing.

Scarcely noticing what was on his plate, Jack began eating, wondering how to get a conversation between them started. Should he wait for her to speak? Perhaps that would be best….

By now the Pirate Lords were busily discussing recent events and absent friends, exchanging information and gossip. Jack heard Don Rafael say, "You'll never guess who I encountered at Oporto a few months ago!"

"Who was that?" Teague asked, pouring more wine for his fellow Pirate Lords.

"James."

Teague's eyebrows rose, and Villanueva exclaimed, "*Dios mio*! I thought he must have met with a rope long ago! It has been years!"

"It has been many years," agreed Don Rafael. "I thought the same thing. But there he was, sitting at a table in a little *taberna*, eating." He took a bite of his own food, chewed, then added, "He's lost a hand."

"You spoke with him, *da*?" Borya asked.

"Of course. I walked over and joined him. He seemed startled, but glad to see me. When I asked him later on how he was managing without the hand, he said that it wasn't so bad, the hook was as good as a dagger in a fight."

"So where has he been keeping himself ?" Villanueva asked.

"I asked him, but he wouldn't say. Prison? That doesn't seem likely, all these years." Don Rafael shrugged. "And it's not as though they lock us up."

Jack swallowed hard. Everyone knew the penalty for piracy. He'd seen the gibbets too many times, with their dangling bodies.

"Aside from the lost hand, how did he seem?" Teague asked.

Don Rafael shook his head, his expression puzzled. "It was strange, *Eduardo*. He commented on this." The Pirate Lord ran a hand over his thick gray hair, which touched his shoulders. "Since the last time we were together, I barely had any gray. But he didn't look a day older. Not a day."

Jack's attention was suddenly far more focused. *Interesting…I wouldn't mind not aging…*

"Odd," Teague admitted. Few pirates lived to be old, and the few that did had features that betrayed their years.

"Did he brag as much as he used to?" Mistress Ching asked.

"No, and that was strange, too," Don Rafael replied. "James was a lot more…subdued. You remember his temper. He'd fly into such rages."

Villanueva gulped wine, then nodded. "I kept expecting his crew to slit his throat in his sleep and send him to Davy Jones. But they were all too frightened of him."

"The night I saw him, he held his temper—and his tongue," Don Rafael said. "Very closed-mouthed, he was. I only saw his composure disturbed once during the meal. The *taberna* keeper's little lad came round to collect our plates, and when he turned and saw him, for just a second he looked—scared. No, worse than that. Terrified." Don Rafael held out his wine goblet to be refilled. "Can you imagine that? Afraid! Of a young boy!"

Silence fell, as the Pirate Lords contemplated Don Rafael's strange account. Jack stole another glance at Emeralda as she carefully patted her lips with her serviette. Reminded by her example, he used his own, not his sleeve.

Teague sipped wine, then cleared his throat. "We should return to our subject," he said, inclining his head

courteously to the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean. “That is, if you were finished, Don Rafael?”

“Oh, *si*!” the Pirate Lord said. “I am sorry, forgive an old man’s gossip. I actually had a point to make. Just before we parted company, James mentioned that he had come upon a man, half dead, floating in the sea. They pulled him out, and before he died, he told them a story similar to the ones I have heard here today. He said it happened off the coast of India. It seems these villains are everywhere.” He paused, then glanced meaningfully at Teague and added, “And then of course, there was the other story I heard….”

“Excuse me…Señor Sparrow?” said a soft voice in cultured accents. “Would you please pass the bread?”

Jack quickly turned his attention back to Esmeralda, pleased that she’d spoken to him. Quickly, he passed the loaf to her. “Thank you, Señor,” she said, cutting away busily.

“You are most welcome.” Now that he had an opening, Jack was quick to follow the advantage. “How long have you been sailing with Don Rafael, Doña Esmeralda?”

He was rewarded with a little smile, and his heart jumped. “Since I was fifteen. Eleven years, now.”

“All the Pirate Lords speak well of him,” Jack said. “He’s held in great respect.”

Hearing this praise of her grandfather brought another smile. Lady Esmeralda buttered her bread. “He is my hero. We are the only family left to each other. After my parents died, he decided I must become a fine lady, perhaps serve at court, so he put me in a convent school in Barcelona. I missed him—and the sea—so much.” Her smile took on a touch of irony. “I hadn’t been there a month before I knew I wasn’t destined for the court of His Majesty.”

“I’ve never been to school,” Jack said. “I can barely imagine what it would be like. What did you do?”

“I applied myself to my lessons, and went without sweets so I could pay for fencing lessons in secret. After I

had learned all they thought proper for a woman to know, I ran away from the school and found him. I was fifteen."

"He didn't try to take you back to Barcelona?"

She laughed softly. "Not directly. Instead, he brought me to Shipwreck Cove. I think he thought that I'd be so horrified by the exposure to pirate life that I'd agree to go back to the nuns. Instead, I loved the life. I've been with him ever since."

Jack calculated, then was glad the room wasn't better lit, because he could feel heat in his face. "So…that time when I…you had just come here from a *convent*?"

Esmeralda, taking in his expression, giggled. "Would it have hurt worse, to know you'd been trounced by a girl from a convent?"

Jack's sense of the ridiculous saved him, and he flashed her a grin. "Yes, I suppose it would have. The bruises hurt badly enough. Teague wanted to know which of his men had thrashed me."

"What did you tell him?"

"I was in a bit of a quandary," Jack admitted. "I couldn't tell him the truth, of course, and I didn't want to identify anyone because Teague can be…rough…on those who annoy him."

"I've heard," she said, softly. "So what did you do?"

"I didn't say anything," Jack said.

Esmeralda shook her head. Her thick, black hair, softly curling, was held back from her face by tortoiseshell combs. Jack found himself imagining what it would be like to run his hands through that hair. Hastily, he looked down and took a random bite of food. "What did Teague do to you for not telling him?" she whispered, after a moment.

Jack picked up his wine goblet, and took a sip. "He gave me a worse hiding than you did," he said, after a moment, careful to keep his tone light.

"*Dios mio*," she said, softly. "I'm sorry…" she hesitated, and he could tell she was wondering how to address him.

“Jack. Please.”

“Very well. I am sorry…Jack.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “I’m sure I deserved it. Taught me a valuable lesson.”

“And that was?” Her English was very fluent, with just a delightful hint of an accent.

“First impressions can be very deceiving,” Jack replied. “I’ll never again underestimate an opponent…or a lady.” He tipped his goblet toward her in a small salute, then drank.

Her eyes widened, then narrowed slightly, and she, in turn, reached for her goblet. After she’d sipped her wine, she looked back up at him, and her dark eyes danced with mischief. “That’s a valuable lesson,” she agreed, mock-solemn. “You’ve certainly learned a lot of things since the last time we met. Who taught you to be charming?”

Jack looked at her, and smiled, a slow, genuine smile. “Do you like to fish, Doña Esmeralda?”

“Sometimes,” she said, then added slowly, “I like swimming better. Are there still good places to swim on the other side of the island?”

“There are,” Jack said. “Would you like to sail around the island and find some of those places? With me?”

“That would please me, Jack,” she said. “And please, call me Esmeralda?”

“Nothing would please me more…Esmeralda.”

Jack smiled at her. He realized his plate was empty, though he couldn’t recall a single thing he’d eaten. Servitors quickly cleared away the remainder of the meal. When they had finished, Teague stood up. “Brethren of the Coast,” he said, formally, “Don Rafael brought with him a man that I want you to meet. He is one of us, a man on the account, and he has personally witnessed the actions of these rogue pirates. I want you to hear what he has to say.”

The Keeper of the Code nodded, and the guard opened the door.

A scar-faced man wearing a huge, battered hat strode in, and then halted beside Teague.

“Ladies, gentlemen, allow me present to you Captain Hector Barbossa.”

Captain Barbossa stepped up to the table and stood before the assembled Pirate Lords. Teague indicated a chair, but he shook his grizzled head. “Thankee, Cap’n Teague, but I prefer to stand,” he said, in a gravelly voice.

As he stood there, gazing down at each of the Pirate Lords in turn, Jack found himself covertly studying the man with some curiosity. Barbossa had an accent that he couldn’t quite place, and he was usually good at that kind of thing. *West Country. Cornwall, perhaps?*

Jack estimated he was in his early forties. His weather-beaten features with the scraggly beard wouldn’t have been handsome even if they’d been unmarred. His clothing was old and battered, stained with salt and other, less pleasant, substances. But his baldric was well oiled, and his weapons were clean. His eyes were sharp; they missed nothing.

“Gents…Ladies…” Barbossa said, inclining his head, “’Tis lucky I am to be standing here afore ye today. Two months ago, almost to the day, me ship *Cobra* was attacked and sunk by one of our own. We had raised our true colors, and yet still they tried to slaughter us. We were attacked by one of our own brethren…a clear violation of the Code, ’twas.”

His accented speech was so affectedly “salty” Jack half expected him to say “Arrrrr” at any moment. And yet, despite the accented, rough speech, here was a man of some intelligence, perhaps even a man with some education.

Teague nodded. “Please tell us the entire story, Captain Barbossa.”

“Aye, Cap’n Teague,” Barbossa said. “And hard tellin’ it be, sir. Every time I think about me poor Polly…” he hesitated, and an expression of genuine sorrow flickered

across his face. Jack was surprised to see it. Barbossa impressed him as a tough, no-holds-barred pirate, someone who would make a formidable opponent in a fight—a good swordsman, but not one to abide by prissy rules. Here was a man who would knock you down and kick your teeth in as easily as look at you, if you were unwise enough to cross him.

"Who is this Polly?" Mistress Chin demanded. "Your doxy?"

Barbossa looked rather shocked. "Course not, ma'am. 'Tis bad luck to be bringing a woman aboard a ship. Polly ain't—warn't—human."

"Polly, that is the English name of a parrot," Villanueva observed.

"I did have a parrot named Polly once," Barbossa admitted. "A fine bird he was, but he messed up the shoulder of me jacket." Jack saw the hint of something that might have been sardonic humor flash across his features, and realized Barbossa was indulging in a bit of irony. The grizzled pirate sighed theatrically. "But the Polly I lost after the battle was me little monkey. Pretty little thing, she was. Understood every word I said to her."

Teague cleared his throat, and a touch of impatience showed in his normally impassive features. "Tell us about the battle, Captain Barbossa," he urged.

Jack watched as Barbossa hesitated. *He came here to tell his tale*, he thought. *Why doesn't he?* For a moment he was puzzled, then understanding dawned. Here was a man who was so accustomed to being devious, that even when he *wanted* to tell the straightforward truth, it was difficult for him to do.

"Aye, well." Barbossa thought for a moment, then straightened his shoulders as though he were about to cross swords. "Let me just tell it as it happened, gents and ladies. Me ship was a tidy little schooner, name of *Cobra*. We were sailin' in waters north of Bermuda, on our way back from an

encounter we'd had with a Frenchy barque. Took a nice haul, we did. Ivory. We were ridin' low in the water, so laden we be. Then me topman spies a sail. We thought we'd take a look, so we changed course, and they must have spotted us, too, because they did likewise."

Jack leaned forward, listening intently. Lady Esmeralda touched his sleeve with her fingertips and he turned to her. She gave a slight shake of her head. "He told his story to us on the voyage to Shipwreck Cove," she murmured, for his hearing alone. "It is most disturbing."

Barbossa continued. "When we spied that sail, it was already late in the afternoon, and it took us a few hours to approach each other. I told me men to run up a Frenchy ensign, in honor of our rich cargo. And the stranger, he did the same—showed Dutch colors. Finally, not too long afore sunset, we came within long gun range of each other. I'd been studyin' him through me spyglass, and I had me suspicions. The ship was a sloop, Bermuda-rigged, common vessel, especially in these parts. I caught a few glimpses of the crew, and even at that distance they didn't seem as though they were wearin' the right clothin' for merchantmen. So I orders me crew to run up me black flag.

"The moment we raised our true colors, that sloop, he run up his flag, too. A red flag, with a black demon skull on it. 'Twas then I knew for certain that he was another pirate. We all had a good laugh, me and me crew. We waved at 'em. They waved back. Then I gives the order to come about, to put our rudder to 'em. The Code calls for us all to respect our fellows on the account, and I was abiding by it."

"On the account" was pirate slang for piracy. Jack saw the Keeper of the Code nod approvingly as Barbossa described his actions. "What happened then?"

"We'd no sooner put our stern to 'em than the blackguards fired on us! I'd noticed a big, fancy ornamented brass bow chaser on his vessel through me glass. Indian work, it looked to be. Fired a big shot…nine-pounder,

maybe. The first one missed us, but the second one got us, and blew our rudder to flinders. *Cobra* began taking on water. I used me sails and threw out me anchor to turn her, and returned fire. Broadsided ’em good, we did.”

Barbossa’s words were weaving a spell in the room, Jack realized, glancing at the Pirate Lords. Each of them was listening with an expression that said, clearer than words, that the captain’s account was bringing back memories of hard-fought engagements.

Barbossa’s voice grew a bit rougher, as if remembering this part was almost painful. “They shot back, of course, and we battled till the air was so thick with smoke that you could scarce see your target, save by the muzzle flashes from her gun ports. It was a fight, it was. Half me men were dead or dyin’ when I realized that the sun must have set. By that time I knew there was no hope for me poor *Cobra*; she was sinking fast. I knew darkness was our only chance to escape, so I gives the order to abandon ship. Half our boats had been reduced to kindlin’ but we still had a few that were seaworthy.”

Jack, envisioning the situation, swallowed hard as he reached for his wine goblet. He’d been on a foundering ship before, following a losing battle, and Barbossa’s story brought the memories back. The smell of the blood mixed with the acrid tang of burned powder. The screams, moans, and curses of the wounded. The deck, slippery with blood and spilt entrails beneath one’s boots…and the smoke, making your eyes water, the tears making clean trails down the blackened faces of the gunnery crew…

Barbossa stood there, looking at the expressions on the faces of his listeners, and nodded. “You all know what it was like. We launched the boats as best we could, but several of ’em tipped as they lowered, spillin’ some of us into the sea. The gunnery crew kept firin’ to hide our effort, and then leaped into the water just as *Cobra* began to go down. A dozen of ’em got sucked down with the ship.

“I was in the water, no boat within reach. Me poor Polly had been holdin’ on to me shoulder. She was wearin’ her little blue dress, but suddenly she wasn’t there and I couldn’t see her. I swam under, gropin’ through the water and the wreckage, tryin’ to find her, but she was gone. When I came up to breathe, ready to dive again, even though I knew ’twas hopeless, two of me crew, witless one-eyed Ragetti and his grinnin’ imp of a friend Pintel, grabbed me jacket and pulled me into their boat. Fools they be, but I’m grateful to ’em.

“Only the darkness saved us, for they sent out boats to kill those they found alive in the water. Hard to say which was worse, them or the sharks. We heard that devil crew laughin’ when men screamed as they were pulled under. Davy Jones’s locker be too good for soulless wretches like that.” Barbossa took a deep breath, then added, “We stayed quiet, muffling our oars with our clothes as we rowed away. We rowed in shifts, silent that whole night. When dawn reached us, there was no sign of that cursed ship and her crew of murdering blackguards.”

He drew a deep breath. “There’s little more to tell. We managed to reach an island, and by good fortune it wasn’t barren. We built a signal fire. A week or thereabouts of tending it, and a ship—men on the account—dropped anchor and sent a boat to see who we were. They took us to Tortuga, and there we met Don Rafael, who told me the Pirate Lords currently present at Shipwreck Cove would want t’ hear me story. Which is how I came t’ be standin’ here before ye today.”

Barbossa fell silent, seeming drained by the recitation.

Borya, Pirate Lord of the Caspian, was the first to break the silence that filled the chamber. “Monsters, not men, *da*?” he said, quietly. Then, so suddenly that Jack jumped, the little Russian slammed his dagger down into the scarred tabletop, so it stood, point-down, quivering, and added, “Such evil deserves only death from us, Captain Teague.”

Jack glanced at the little man, and saw a flash of something behind his spectacles. Pity? Anger? Some strong emotion, it had been. And yet, Borya's words, despite his violent gesture, had been spoken in a level voice, completely dispassionately. Jack frowned, struck by the contrast between that gesture and those words, and how they had been voiced.

The Keeper of the Code indicated a seat at the table. "Please sit down, Captain Barbossa. We would like you to remain for our discussion." Teague nodded at the servitor. "Some wine for the captain."

"Thankee, Cap'n Teague," Barbossa said, seating himself. He took the wine goblet that was offered to him, and drained it in a few loud gulps. "Thirsty work," he announced, setting it back down. "You'd think it would grow easier in the tellin'…but it doesn't."

"The Butcher is right; Code-breakers deserve only death from us," Mistress Ching announced. Her sightless eyes shone eerily in the dimness.

"As the Keeper has pointed out, the navies of the world will not discriminate between them and us," Villanueva said. "These rogues could take us all down with them."

"We should find them and deal with them," Don Rafael said. "We know the seas better than any naval vessel."

"We do, *da*," Borya said. "*Koldunya* stands ready to find rogue vessel and capture her."

Jack surprised himself by speaking up. "It seems to me that there must be more than one vessel. After listening to so many reports, there are just too many encounters or near-encounters for one vessel to be causing them all."

Teague gave him a glance, and it was clear that the Keeper was surprised to hear Jack say something relevant and sensible. He did not speak, however, only nodded.

"Aye, lad," Barbossa said. "From what Don Rafael told me, you're making sense. Too many attacks within a short time period, too widely spaced. Can't be the work of a single

devil ship.” He gave Jack a measuring glance. “And who be ye, lad?”

“Jack Sparrow,” Jack replied, with a cordial nod. “It’s always regrettable to hear about the loss of a good ship, Captain Barbossa.”

The man nodded back. “Aye, ’tis. And when we find the scurvy blackguard responsible, he can apologize to me little Polly personally, in Davy Jones’s locker.” As his gaze met Jack’s, Hector Barbossa grinned, a brief, grim flash of stained teeth, and added, “I’ll volunteer to stand executioner, Cap’n Teague. There’s nothing I’d like more than to make each of those devils a hemp cravat. Shooting’s too good for the likes of scum like that.”

In a few more minutes the meeting broke up. Jack rose, as did Esmeralda. But Don Rafael remained sitting, as he and Teague continued to question Captain Barbossa.

Esmeralda laid a hand on her grandfather’s shoulder. “I’m tired, Grandfather. I’d like to return to my cabin, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, *mi corazón*,” Don Rafael, said, patting her hand and smiling up at her.

“I’ll summon one of my men to escort Lady Esmeralda back to *Venganza*,” Teague said.

Jack seized this golden opportunity, and, ignoring the Keeper’s warning frown, stepped forward, bowing deeply to the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean. “Don Rafael, I would be honored to accompany the Lady Esmeralda back to your vessel.”

Esmeralda gave Jack a sidewise glance, then smiled. “Why, that would be very nice. Thank you, Jack.” Jack bowed to her, then formally crooked his arm. Esmeralda placed her hand on it, still smiling at him with a warmth that made his head swim, far more than the wine he’d drunk.

“Thank you, lad,” Don Rafael said, giving him a smile and a nod.

Jack resolutely refused to look at Teague as he escorted Esmeralda out of the chamber.

“Look at her come!” Robby Greene’s exclamation broke into Jack’s memories, pulling him back to the present. He blinked, focusing on their pursuer. In the few minutes he’d been woolgathering, *Venganza* was visibly closer. The pirate vessel was approaching in a rush, now that the *Fair Wind* was more or less stationary.

Jack figured in half an hour, she’d be right on top of them. “Mr. Greene!” Captain Bainbridge’s voice reached them from the quarterdeck. “Hoist our colors!”

Jack watched as Robby hastily complied. First, the red, white, and blue Union Jack rose fluttering into the air all the way to the peak of the spanker gaff. Then Robby moved to the mainmast, and their house ensign, the East India Trading Company’s dark gray flag, went skimming skyward, all the way to the truck of the mainmast. Training his spyglass on *Venganza*, Jack smiled grimly as he watched the navy’s mostly white version of the Union Jack ascend. When he saw the British flag raised on the other ship, Bainbridge looked down from the railing of the quarterdeck and pointed, as though to say, “See! She’s Royal Navy, just as I told you.”

Jack rolled his eyes. Raising false colors was one of the oldest tricks in the book. Bainbridge had served in the Royal Navy; he should know that. And perhaps he did, but was just managing to conveniently “forget.”

Onward came the pirate vessel. Jack stood on the weather deck, legs braced against the heave and dip of the sea, feeling his heart beat faster.

It had been years since he’d seen her. The last time had been outside a little inn in Barbados, and she’d been “in disguise”—dressed as a Spanish noblewoman. She’d pulled it off well, which was no surprise to Jack, since, at least by

birth, she actually *was* a Spanish noblewoman. They'd met, recognized each other, then stepped off the path to stroll under the palm trees, not far from the beach, talking softly so they wouldn't be overheard, their voices muffled by the roar of the surf. There hadn't been time or privacy for anything more. They'd had barely two hours, and then he'd had to report back to his ship. That had been…what? Two years ago? *Almost three, now*.

That brief visit had been when she'd told him about Don Rafael's untimely death, leaving her captain of *Venganza*, and the new Pirate Lord of the Caribbean.

He watched as *Venganza* changed course as she approached the brig, so that she made a half-circle around *Fair Wind* and then hove to on her windward side. This was a typical pirate maneuver, designed to cut off the wind from the prey. Jack glanced up at the quarterdeck, wondering whether Bainbridge had yet realized who their visitors were.

He didn't see the captain. Frowning, Jack started forward, mounting the ladder quickly. The quarterdeck was empty, save for the helmsman. *Where did the captain go?*

Just as he was about to run back down the portside ladder, Bainbridge appeared at the bottom, and climbed up. He was wearing his best ceremonial sword—the one with the gold wire threaded into the grip, and his initials on the pommel—and carried his own spyglass in his hand. Jack stepped aside as the older man rushed past him and strode across the quarterdeck, then put his eye to the spyglass and stared long and hard.

Jack surveyed *Venganza* through his own spyglass, and could clearly see figures bustling around her deck—armed figures who wore a motley assortment of clothing, running the gamut from stripped to the waist to being elegantly turned out in long satin coats, perukes, and stylish knee britches. Many had scarves tied over their heads. They were armed to the teeth, many wearing baldrics holding two or

more pistols, and all wore cutlasses. The sailors on the port side were readying grappling irons.

Lowering his spyglass, Jack turned to the captain. Bainbridge was staring at the frigate, shock etched in every line of his countenance, which had gone a peculiar shade of pinkish gray. Remembering how Bainbridge had lectured him earlier, Jack had to bite his lip to keep from saying, “Told you so.” *Clearly, the light is dawning for our beloved captain. Well, a bit of a shock is bracing, they say.*

As Jack watched, Bainbridge took out a leather flask and raised it to his lips, then drank deeply. The sweet smell of the wine wafted on the breeze. Bainbridge lowered the flask, then looked over at Jack. “I could see…” he stopped, swallowed, and tried again. “I could see…they’re not Royal Navy. You were right, Sparrow. Pirates.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said, as neutrally as he could. “Perhaps we should discuss the best way to deal with them? We don’t want anyone harmed. I recommend we strike our colors immediately and hoist a white flag.”

“Surrender?” Bainbridge gulped. He swiped his hand across his sweating brow, then his upper lip. “That doesn’t seem right. We’re Englishmen. We’re supposed to fight, Mr. Sparrow,” he whispered, shakily. His speech was beginning to slur a bit.

“Not in a situation such as this one, Captain,” Jack said, “No one will question your decision to surrender. We can’t get away. She’s faster than we are, and now she’s blocking our wind. She’s a twenty-eight gun frigate, and pirates are experienced in hand-to-hand fighting. They’ll cut our men down if you order them to resist, and they’ll have died for nothing. You can’t want that.”

Bainbridge shook his head, not speaking. His shoulders slumped.

“Captain…” Jack used all his powers of persuasion. “All we have to do is stay hove-to and run up a white flag. They’ll board us, they’ll take the rum, then they’ll sail away.

We'll be a lighter vessel, but no one will be hurt. And it won't be the first time the EITC has lost a cargo to pirates." This last comment was tinged with irony, as Jack recalled several EITC ships that he'd helped Teague take while he'd been serving aboard *Troubadour*.

Bainbridge took a deep, shaky breath. "No one could blame me for having to surrender to a pirate who captains a ship like *that*," he said, staring mesmerized at *Venganza*'s gun ports. The frigate, her sails half furled, was drifting toward them at a leisurely, but inexorable, rate. The captain added, plainly trying to convince himself, "I've heard tales about them, you know? They're animals. He's likely a huge brute, with human thumbs strung on a chain around his neck. A black-hearted cutthroat. I must think of my men. I must consider their safety. You're right, Sparrow."

"Indubitably, sir," Jack said, pleased to hear that his advice had apparently sunk in. "No one could possibly fault you.'

He's in for a ruddy shock when he sees Esmeralda, Jack thought, studying the captain with a touch of concern. *Perhaps she's not aboard…perhaps she's at Shipwreck Cove, and sent her ship out to capture a few prizes.* Pirate Lords sometimes did send their ships out without them, rather than keep their crews idle too long.

"Sir," he said, "I'll need to speak to our crew, make sure they know how to react. We'll soon be boarded, and we don't want anyone doing anything…" the word *stupid* almost emerged, but at the last moment, Jack changed it to "rash."

Bainbridge was staring at Jack as though he'd never seen him before. "How did you know which vessel was pursuing us, Mr. Sparrow? Miles away? How in the world did you *know*?"

Jack thought fast. "Captain Bainbridge, I lied to you earlier, and I'm sorry, sir. I didn't want to have to explain how I knew about the Blackwall frigate because it's all a

very bad memory for me. You see, I was kidnapped once by one of those cutthroats you mention, sir," he said. "Forced on pain of death to sail with him aboard his ship. I barely escaped with me…my…life. While I was a prisoner, I heard them talk about their pirate brethren, and their ships. Including that Blackwall frigate." He looked down at the deck and added softly, "It's not something I like to talk about, Captain." *Yet another instance where telling the exact truth constitutes the best lie*, he thought, smugly.

"No need to, lad," Bainbridge said, patting Jack's shoulder roughly. "I understand." He took another long gulp from his flask. By the sound of it, he finished the contents. After he'd stowed away the flask, he straightened a bit. "Very well, then, Mr. Sparrow. Strike our colors. And then talk to the men. I must go below to get…" he paused, then cleared his throat, "…err, something I forgot," he finished, after a moment. "Be right back, Sparrow."

"Aye, sir," Jack said. But before he could turn away, he caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. He pointed. "Look, Captain. She's hoisting her true colors."

Bainbridge turned around and they stood shoulder to shoulder, watching Doña Pirata's flag rapidly ascending. The new flag was black, but it was one Jack had never seen. He studied it, then smothered a grin. *Well, that's distinctive!*

The black flag snapped in the breeze, clearly visible, since *Venganza* was now no more than five hundred yards away. It showed a skeleton with both arms held out. In one bony hand, the skeleton clasped an hourglass, to tell the prey that their time was up, unless they cooperated. The other hand grasped a wicked looking cutlass. All of these elements were fairly standard ones in a pirate flag. What made this one unique was that the skeleton was wearing a *skirt*. Jack raised his spyglass to study the flag, then swept it across the deck again. He was rewarded with a glimpse of a short figure wearing a large hat with a sweeping plume.

Studying that figure, he confirmed that it definitely wasn't male, and felt his spirits rise. *Esmeralda, my lovely…*

As Jack gazed at *Venganza*'s clean lines, he remembered what it had been like to sail beneath a black flag, and fought back a pang of nostalgia. Remembering the freedom, the wildness, the excitement—as heady as any draught of rum!—that came with capturing a prize and preparing to board her was like looking back on a fever dream. It seemed distant, unreal, and yet the memories were larger than life, more vivid than anything that had happened to him in the past five years.

Jack's mouth tightened. *You left that life for good reason, Jacky-boy*, a well-remembered voice whispered in his mind. *You can't go back, even if you wanted to, remember?* ***You broke the Code.*** *If I ever catch up with you, you'll be soon be facing Davy Jones, Jacky-boy, and you know it.…*

Jack's mouth tightened. *It's not like I* ***want*** *to go back*, he reminded himself, sourly. *Why the devil would I? I'm an honest merchant sailor, now, a ruddy* ***officer****, thanks to five sodding years of hard work and keeping my nose clean.*

As a merchant seaman, he might lose his cargo, but, unless he was unlucky enough to run afoul of one of the rogue pirates, he'd still have his life. As long as he stayed within the letter of the law, and didn't bend the rules too much, he'd never again have to fear mounting a scaffold to the sound of a drumbeat, then feeling the noose tighten around his neck.

Staring up at Doña Pirata's flag, Jack told himself it was worth it. Someday he'd have his own ship, and be captain of it. *Captain Jack Sparrow*. It had a good ring to it.

He glanced over at Bainbridge, to find him still staring up at the flag, eyes wide, jaw slack. Bainbridge was expecting some huge, ugly brute of a pirate captain, a tattooed, hairy-faced buccaneer straight out of bogey stories. How many shocks could the old man absorb in one

day, Jack wondered uneasily. He cleared his throat. “Captain Bainbridge? Sir?”

Bainbridge seemed to shake himself. He turned to Jack. “Mr. Sparrow,” he said. “Hurry and speak to the crew. The men will require reassurance.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” Jack said, touching the brim of his tricorne, in a gesture enough like a naval salute that, as he’d intended, it reassured the older man. Bainbridge preceded him down the ladder and headed below—no doubt to replenish the contents of the flask, Jack thought. For a moment he wished *he* had the leisure to nip down to his berth and have a swig or two—or three—of rum.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, he bellowed, “All hands!”

The crew seemed to have been waiting for his order, because they assembled in record time. Third Mate Tomlin led the pack. Jack made his way through the throng, then stepped up onto the base of the gun carriage that held the nearest starboard cannon, so they could see him. He could also see them, and they had clearly figured out what was happening. They were terrified.

Tomlin’s eyes reminded Jack of a spooked dray horse he’d seen one time in London. White rims showed all around the iris. “Mr. Sparrow! P…pirates! Rogue pirates! Pirates, sir! They’ll board us! W…we must fight f…for our lives!” Jack realized Tomlin was wearing a worn baldric and standard-issue cutlass. The third mate started to draw it.

“Mr. Tomlin, belay that,” Jack ordered. Reluctantly, Tomlin obeyed. The men muttered resentfully. Jack saw that most of them were armed; clearly, they’d broken into the arms locker. *Damn, I’d better talk fast*, he realized, *or they’re likely to panic and run riot.*

“Mr. Sparrow, it’s kill or be killed!” Bates said. He held a belaying pin in his hand.

“Aye,” said one of the younger sailors, a lad named Bartholomew Weaver. “I knew this was to be happenin’

today! Last night I dreamed of the moon, wi' blood on it. Rogue pirates they be! They'll kill every man jack of us." Even though his voice hadn't broken yet, it was a lot steadier than Tomlin's panicked bleating.

Jack pursed his lips and shook his head. "No," he said, quietly. "Not true. No one will be harmed. Take it easy, lads."

An excited babble broke out as the men gave their opinions on the type of pirates they were about to face. Hearing at least ten of them avow that they were all going to be slaughtered by rogue pirates, it was all Jack could do not to clutch his hair and let out an anguished moan. *Idiots. I have to calm them down, or someone is apt to get to one of the long guns and do something really stupid!*

"Listen up, mates!" he barked. Grabbing the barrel of the cannon beside him, Jack scrambled up its carriage and slung a leg over, so he was standing astride the long iron barrel and looking down at the crew. "Gentlemen! Your attention, please!" he said, raising both hands for quiet.

They looked up at him, their faces filled with fear, but they obeyed, and in moments the deck was silent save for the sounds of the ship and the sea.

Making his voice as low, soothing, and reasonable as he could, Jack continued. "Lads," he said, "we're men of the sea, not silly farm boys, right?" A few nodded uncertainly. "We sail the ocean, we don't chase around like chickens. We *think*." He tapped his forehead portentously, and saw Robby quickly smother a grin. Luckily, he was at the back of the crowd. "Men, just think for a moment. We don't want to fight these pirates."

Tomlin stared at Jack as though he had risen from the sea like Venus on a scallop shell. The man was so relieved to hear a superior tell him he wouldn't have to fight, Jack thought for a second he might weep with joy. "W…we *don't*, Mr. Sp…parrow?" he quavered.

"Of course not!" Jack said, in a hearty voice. "Oh, I know you're all stout-hearted lads, each man jack of you worth

ten bloody pirates. But there's no *reason* to fight these pirates, because they *aren't* rogue pirates!"

"They ain't?" little Bart squeaked. "How do you know, Mr. Sparrow?"

"Have I ever steered you wrong, mates?" Jack summoned all his persuasive power. "You know me. I steer a straight wake, and I've sailed all seven seas. I know ships. And I swear to you, on me honor, that that frigate over there is no rogue. You can tell because that ship has a *black* flag!"

As one man, they all turned and stared across the short stretch of water that now separated *Venganza* and *Fair Wind.* "He's right," someone muttered. "'Tis black, that flag."

They still weren't convinced, Jack could tell. "And, men, when faced with overwhelming odds, and a bloody frigate with fourteen very large guns, pointed directly at us, broadside-wise, well, men who *think* realize that fighting would be as…as senseless as raising full canvas in a typhoon." Jack took a deep breath. "So, lads, I'm ordering you to just sit down here on the deck, and let these pirates board us. They'll take the EITC's rum, and then they'll sail away, while you sit here, safe as houses, obeying old Jack Sparrow's orders. Resisting that pirate ship would gain us nothing but a swift passage to Davy Jones's locker. Savvy?"

Tomlin frowned. "But Morty, he told me them were rogue pirates," he insisted, stubbornly. "I heard 'im meself." At the back of the crowd, Morty Phillips gulped, his enormous Adam's apple bobbing along the skinny column of his neck like a cork float on a fishing line.

"Morty," Jack said, reprovingly. He shook his head. "Tell us the truth. Have you ever seen a pirate before?"

Morty gulped again, "No, Mr. Sparrow."

"Well, there you have it," Jack said, airily. "Where I come from, even lads too young to drink rum know that rogue pirates fly a *red* flag."

“That’s right,” Robby Greene chimed in, loyally. “A red flag with a demon on it.”

“I heard it were a demon wi’ horns,” Tomlin admitted, scratching his head as he pondered this weighty conundrum.

“Exactly!” Jack pointed to Tomlin, beaming approvingly. “Most astute of you, Mr. Tomlin! And anyone can see that ship over there has a *black* flag.”

Tomlin turned, glanced over at the frigate, then turned back. He cogitated. “It be a black flag, sure enough,” he admitted, finally.

Jack relaxed, sensing he was winning. He grinned at the crew, and waved his hands in a sweeping “there you have it!” gesture. “Indubitably, it is a flag of the *noir* nature,” he agreed. “And we would all be wise to remember that. And so, lads, I’ll be very pleased if you’ll just obey orders, and not, as it were, attempt to shoot holes in that lovely frigate over there. Or poke holes in her crew. Matter of fact, I’d like those of you who have armed yourselves to lay your weapons right here.” He pointed.

Quickly, they obeyed, and in a minute or so a hodgepodge pile of battered cutlasses, pistols, daggers, dirks, and belaying pins lay at Jack’s feet.

“That’s right,” said Jack as he encouraged the last fellow to surrender his cutlass. He gestured. “Now that everyone is sanguine, that is to say, calm as cream cakes, we all know just what to do. Right, lads?”

“But Mr. Sparrow,” Tomlin said, doubtfully, his brow furrowed, “they’ll take our cargo.”

Jack resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *The man’s a bloody genius.* He didn’t dare glance at Robby. Later, in private, they could laugh at Tomlin’s idiocy.

“Yes, they will doubtless carry off our cargo of rum,” Jack said. He sighed with genuine regret. “As upsetting as that prospect naturally is, it is infinitely more desirable than engaging said pirates in a fight that we would only lose,

while paying dearly for our folly. Look at it this way. By *not* resisting, we'll be doing the East India Trading Company the enormous service of not depriving them of a very seaworthy vessel and an experienced crew of able-bodied seamen. Savvy?"

"Yes, sir." Tomlin's eyes shone as he finally got it. As far as he was concerned, Jack was a god.

"Very well, then, look sharp now, lads," Jack said. "You're all going to find yourselves a good spot to sit down here on the weather deck, and take a nice rest. The pirates are only interested in our cargo. So offer no resistance. Just take a load off, mates. Dismissed."

"Aye, Mr. Sparrow!" the crew chorused, and scurried to obey—all but Edward Tomlin, who remained there, gazing up at Jack with worshipful brown eyes, reminding the first mate of a spaniel he'd once encountered. Jack resisted the urge to pat him on the head as he addressed Robby. "Mr. Greene, please strike our colors. Lively, now! And hoist a white flag, if we have one." He beckoned the second mate closer. "And then we need to get rid of these damned things," he muttered, glancing down at the pile of discarded blunt and sharp instruments of mayhem. "I'll take the first load down and lock them in the lazaretto. You and Tomlin get the rest."

"Aye, Jack," Robby said with a nod, then raced off.

Jack slung as many baldrics as he could around himself, stuck pistols in his belt until he could scarcely breathe, and picked up unsheathed cutlasses. Arms loaded, he headed below to the lazaretto, a smallish partitioned room in the fore part of the 'tween decks. Provisions and other somewhat valuable items were stored there, since it had a lock. Jack stashed the arms there, and used his key to lock them in.

When he returned to the weather deck, he was just in time to see Bainbridge ascending the ladder to the quarterdeck. After passing Robby the key to the lazaretto, he followed the captain.

When he reached Bainbridge, he found the old man standing on the port side, staring out at the open sea. The flask was in his hand. “Captain,” Jack said, “I’ve spoken to the men and reassured them. The pirates will be boarding in a few minutes. We have a white flag up. But they’ll want the two of us down on the weather deck, too, so they can keep an eye on us.”

Bainbridge sighed, then turned around to face his first mate. Jack felt a stir of pity when he saw how aged and beaten the old man appeared. He was still wearing his ceremonial sword, and, Jack saw, now had a pistol belt slung over his other shoulder, and his personal weapon in it. *Can’t let him run around armed*, he thought. *He’ll get himself killed.*

“Captain, just come below,” he said, and dared to lay a hand on the old man’s sleeve. “Let me lock your sword and that pistol up, with the other weapons, and perhaps they won’t take them. I can handle this, if you’ll just give the order. I can talk to their captain. I know how they think. I may be able to…negotiate.”

Over Bainbridge’s shoulder, he saw that in a few minutes, the frigate would be in range of the grappling hooks. Pirates lined up along the gunwales, ready to fling the lines with their hooks attached. Once the two ships were grappled together, *Venganza*’s crew would be able to cross freely back and forth between the two vessels.

“Negotiate?” Bainbridge said, dully.

“You know…parlay with her. I may be able to convince her to take only a percentage of the cargo, instead of all of it.”

“Her?” Bainbridge blinked small, reddened eyes, then stared at Jack owlishly. “You’ll talk to the *ship*?”

Jack could have kicked himself for that slip. “Um,” he said, trying to feel his way. *Maybe I should cushion the blow a bit…*“Captain, it’s possible that the commander of this

pirate frigate is female," he said. "While I was a prisoner that time, my captor spoke of female pirates."

Bainbridge blinked, surprised out of his stupor. "What?" He gaped at Jack. "Balderdash!" he finally managed. "Impossible! No woman could captain a vessel. That would be unnatural, a violation of the laws of God and man. The… the Almighty would never permit it." He leaned closer to Jack, peering at him, and sniffed loudly. "Have you been drinking, Sparrow?"

The captain's breath was enough to knock over a cart horse. Jack stepped back, away from the blast. "No, but I wish I had been," he mumbled, wearily. His comment was drowned out by a series of loud thumps. The deck beneath his feet rose and fell. Jack looked away from Bainbridge to see that the grappling hooks were in place, drawing the two ships together. Standing ready to board first was the figure he'd glimpsed through the spyglass.

She was still petite, but this time, instead of a dress, she wore her working garb: a loose-sleeved pale homespun shirt that laced up the front, and a metal reinforced corselet made of black leather. Her shapely legs were clad in dark trousers, with high, folded-over black boots. On her head was a broad-brimmed black hat. One side was rolled up, and a jaunty black-and-white plume waved in the breeze.

Doña Pirata's crew crowded in beside her and behind her, shouting with excitement as they hauled on the grappling lines, bringing the two ships together. As Jack watched, she turned to them and made a quick gesture. They stepped back and quieted immediately. Seeing that, Jack repressed a smile. He'd always known she'd be a good leader. A good pirate.

In his bemusement at seeing the famous Lady Pirate in her natural element, Jack had forgotten all about Captain Bainbridge until the older man muttered, "Damnation! By all that's holy, Sparrow! The captain *is* a female!"

Jack wheeled around to see the old man's eyes flash with righteous indignation. Bainbridge's hand rested on the hilt of his sword. Jack swallowed. "Captain, pass over those weapons. I'll take them and lock them up, but I'll have to do it fast, sir, or you'll lose them."

He reached out. Bainbridge swatted his hand aside and dodged around him, moving like a man half his age. "I'll not permit such an abomination aboard my ship!" he snarled. "She's wearing *trousers*! Heaven and Earth, I'll not abide it! No strumpet pirate will board my ship!"

Jack went after him, but the captain was moving fast, still ranting, but now he was shouting. "By heaven!" he bellowed. "Damn me for a coward if I permit some pirate slut, a mere *woman*, to plunder my ship!" He had almost reached the closest ladder leading down to the weather deck.

"Captain, no!" Jack said, finally catching up. Grabbing the older man's upper arm with both hands, he swung him around bodily. Bainbridge cursed him in terms that would have done a buccaneer proud. Jack was astonished by the old man's strength as they grappled. The pale blue eyes bulged, glaring wildly. Jack ducked and tried to protect his face as Bainbridge slammed fists and elbows into his head and body. The first mate quickly realized that he had to either fight back—which might have merited being hung for mutiny—or let go. Jack's only consolation was that at the last minute he managed to grab the firearm out of Bainbridge's pistol belt. The captain seemed not to notice it was gone. He continued his rush for the ladder, reached it, and started down.

Jack stood for a moment with the pistol in his hand, breathing hard. For a wild second, he thought about cocking and firing it. But the East India Trading Company would take a very dim view of that. And shooting a man in the back just wasn't Jack Sparrow's style. Instead, he shoved the pistol into his own belt, and went tearing after the old man.

In moments, it seemed, Bainbridge was down the ladder, racing across the weather deck. As he ran, he drew his sword, holding it high in his pudgy hand, waving it threateningly. “You’ll not board my ship, pirate strumpet!” he screamed. “For God and the king!”

Doña Pirata, who had just stepped over the gap between the ships and was standing poised on the brig’s gunwale, straightened as she heard Bainbridge’s battle cry. Seeing the old man coming for her, brandishing his sword, she drew her boarding cutlass. Jack, who was scrambling down the ladder yelled, “No! Stop him!” But the crew, sitting obediently on the weather deck, were frozen with shock at the sight of their deranged captain.

With part of his attention he realized that Doña Pirata, with an amused smile, had motioned her own crew back, indicating that she intended to deal with this portly, panting threat herself.

“Lady! No!” Jack yelled again. “Don’t hurt him!”

This time, Esmeralda heard him. Still standing poised on *Fair Wind*’s gunwale, her head turned as she scanned the weather deck, searching for the source of that familiar voice.

Jack knew she couldn’t see him, because *Fair Wind*’s crew, recovering their ability to move, had risen *en masse* and parted before their captain’s mad rush. They milled around, blocking Jack’s passage. He had to shove his way through the crowd. Realizing that any moment the pirate crew would be able to see him, he spared an instant to yank his tricorne down so it shadowed his face. *Can’t let anyone recognize me…Teague probably posted a bounty on my head.*

When he finally emerged from the crush of excited crewmen he bounded toward Esmeralda, who was still poised on the gunwale railing. Waving his arms, he yelled, “Lady! Over here!” He saw her head turn, her eyes widen as she recognized the way he moved. At the same moment,

out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bainbridge reach her. The captain's blade flashed in the noontime sun as he aimed a violent slash at Esmeralda's legs. Jack's breath stopped.

He needn't have worried. Doña Pirata had been schooled in fencing by her grandfather, in addition to the finest sword masters in Barcelona. She leaped nimbly into the air, over the slash, and came down lightly on *Fair Wind*'s deck, behind Bainbridge.

The captain whipped around. "Shameless hussy! Trouser-wearing slattern! Get off my deck!" He came on again, and this time she parried his cut, then disengaged, dancing back. She glanced over her shoulder at Jack, her eyebrows raised inquiringly. Jack could read her question as clearly as if she'd spoken it. *Who **IS** this ancient lunatic?*

"Abomination!" howled the captain. "Leave my ship!"

"Señor." She spoke for the first time, her voice low and musical. She wasn't even breathing hard. "I know not who you are, but you are sadly lacking in manners. That is no way to speak to a lady. Drop your sword, and you and your crew will live."

Bainbridge came in again, slashing madly, and again she parried. She stopped retreating and began to circle, her footwork light and balanced, in contrast to the old man's lumbering steps. "Please, señor. Stop this foolish attack. I do not wish to harm you."

Bainbridge's only reply was an epithet so vile that Jack's eyebrows rose.

"Señor!" Doña Pirata said reprovingly. "Please, such language! I must protest!" She parried another hard but clumsy lunge. "You will upset my crew, hurt their tender ears."

Bainbridge repeated the curse. She laughed. The slow, relentless circling continued. Jack edged around the perimeter of their path, keeping his head ducked so *Venganza*'s crew couldn't see his face, considering his

options. Should he knock the captain out with the butt of the pistol? Esmeralda was toying with Bainbridge, for the moment, and he knew she was speaking truthfully when she said she didn't want to hurt him. But if the old man managed to get in a lucky thrust, or lunge…or if his name-calling annoyed her…

While Jack hesitated, Bainbridge, panting like a dog, cursed his opponent again, slashing wildly at her head. Esmeralda ducked, but as she did so, the tip of the old man's sword caught the plume on her hat, cutting it in half.

She sprang back, saw the puff of white feather fluttering in the breeze, and her expression darkened. "You pompous old fool!" she spat, in Spanish. "I paid twenty pesos for that feather! You stop this nonsense!" And then *she* lunged.

Her form was perfect. Her sword slid in past Bainbridge's guard as smoothly as a dolphin's leap, and the tip found the fleshy upper part of the old man's sword arm. She pinked him, lightly, then disengaged, leaping backward.

Captain Bainbridge staggered back, then halted, staring aghast at his upper arm. After a few moments, a dark spot appeared, slowly spreading. Seeing his own blood, Bainbridge's eyes rolled up in his head. Like a mast toppling before the force of a gale, he swayed, then fell, to lie motionless on the deck.

"*Dios mio*!" Doña Pirata exclaimed. "I barely touched him! What ails the old fool now?"

Jack flung himself down beside the captain. "Captain Bainbridge?" he called. He looked down at the grizzled, weather-beaten countenance and saw pale blue eyes, staring blindly. "Oh, no," he muttered, quickly touching two fingers against the side of Bainbridge's wrinkled neck. Nothing stirred beneath them. Jack yanked open the captain's coat, and pressed his ear against the left side of his chest, listening.

The entire ship seemed to hold its breath.

Beneath Jack’s cheek the old man’s body was still. No heartbeat. Jack listened for a slow count of sixty, then slowly, reluctantly, sat back on his heels. He looked up to see Tomlin and Robby Greene standing over him. “I’m sorry, mates,” he said. “He’s gone.”

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Chapter Three
Doña Pirata

Tomlin gasped, then grabbed Bainbridge's still body, shaking him. "Captain Bainbridge! Wake up, sir!"

When the dead man did not respond, Tomlin wailed, "What's wrong with 'im?" He grabbed the captain's jacket, then the neck of his shirt, and pulled them away from his shoulder, baring the wound. It was tiny, barely half an inch deep. The bleeding had stopped. Tomlin stared at Jack, his jaw working. "But…but…how could this little scratch 'ave done for 'im, Mr. Sparrow?"

"I suspect it was an apoplexy, Mr. Tomlin," Jack said, as gently as he could. "He wasn't a young man."

"No," Tomlin moaned. "What will happen to us without the cap'n?" He put both hands on Bainbridge's shoulders and shook him again, so hard his arms flopped. "Cap'n!"

"Stop that, Mr. Tomlin," Robby Greene ordered, gently but firmly. "It's not respectful."

Tomlin obeyed, trying to gulp back sobs.

Jack squared his shoulders and looked up at the second mate. "Mr. Greene, why don't you and Mr. Tomlin go fetch a hammock?"

"Aye, Mr. Sparrow. Come along, Tomlin," Greene replied.

When a sailor died at sea, he was sewn into his canvas hammock, which became his shroud. As the second and third mate left, many of the men muttered quick prayers, and several crossed themselves.

Jack sighed, then carefully straightened Bainbridge's body and closed the staring blue eyes. He pulled the man's clothing into place, and then placed the captain's hat over

the dead features. Only then did he stand up, still keeping his back to *Venganza* and her watching crew. Replacing the tricorne he'd doffed, he pulled it low over his face, positioning himself so he was partially obscured by the tarred ropes of the shrouds.

Only then did he look up to face Doña Pirata. While they'd been tending to the captain, she'd been standing silently near the gunwale, her cutlass once more sheathed, but now she raised her head and regarded him, her expression carefully blank.

Putting both hands together, chest-high, Jack bobbed a small bow. "Captain…as first mate of the brig *Fair Wind*, I am now in command. I wish to ensure the safety of my crew." He kept his voice low, so it wouldn't carry to her men. Then he added, for her ears alone, in fluent, if badly accented, French, "Please, don't speak my name."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, then she stepped forward. "Señor. You may call me Doña Pirata. I captain the frigate *Venganza*. Señor, I regret the death of your captain. I believe you understand that it was never my intention to cause him harm."

"I witnessed the engagement, Doña Pirata," Jack said, eyeing her, wondering what would happen now. "What transpired was perfectly clear. Captain Bainbridge…when he attacked you, he was not himself." He touched a finger meaningfully to his own temple. "Savvy?"

She nodded. "*Comprendo*, señor. Now we must—" she broke off when Greene and Tomlin returned, carrying a hammock, cord, and a huge needle to sew the hammock closed. "Perhaps we could parlay…somewhere else? So we may speak privately?"

Jack nodded, still keeping his voice low, and said, "Certainly. Though I must remain aboard my ship."

"Let us speak up there," she said, gesturing up at *Fair Wind*'s quarterdeck. "That way both our crews will be able

to witness that we negotiate in good faith and remain in good health."

Jack nodded, then turned to *Fair Wind*'s crew. He avoided looking down at what Robby and Tomlin were doing. "Lads, the Lady Pirate and I are going to discuss what happens now. We'll be up on the quarterdeck." He cleared his throat. "I know we will all miss Captain Bainbridge. His… service…will be tomorrow, at dawn, as custom dictates."

When they had climbed the ladder, and were on the quarterdeck, Jack nodded at the helmsman, still standing at the tiller, and motioned for him to lash the tiller in place, and then leave. When the man started down the portside ladder, Jack and Esmeralda walked to the stern, as far away from the weather deck, and *Fair Wind*'s crew, as they could get. As before, Jack stood with his back to *Venganza*. He knew he was probably being overcautious about concealing his identity; pirate crews experienced a lot of turnover. It was possible that no one in her crew would recognize him. But why take chances?

Esmeralda leaned on the taffrail, gazing silently down at the deck, the brim of her hat obscuring her face. Jack, too, could think of nothing to say. He'd been excited at the thought of seeing her again, but now that they were together, the years apart seemed to rise between them, as tangible as a wall.

Finally, she looked up, and their eyes met.

Suddenly the years fell away and they both spoke at once.

"Jack, to see you like—"

"Esmeralda, I never—"

Both of them stopped. Jack smiled, and gestured with one hand. "Please…continue."

She shrugged, smiled ruefully, then tried again. "This is a very strange meeting, Jack. To see you like this…I hardly recognized you." Turning to stare out to sea, she whispered, "I have missed you."

“I’ve missed you too, love,” Jack said, moving up to stand beside her. “And you’re right; we find ourselves in a very strange situation.”

She nodded, then squared her shoulders, still staring out at the topaz water. “Well, we should get on with business. What cargo are you carrying?”

Jack laughed softly. “Rum, love. One hundred hogsheads. Five thousand gallons.” As he spoke, he remembered the events of the morning. Correction. Ninety-nine hogsheads, and about four thousand nine hundred and fifty gallons, actually. It seemed as though a year had passed since he’d ferreted out the rum thieves, instead of mere hours.

Now it was her turn to laugh, though it held a rueful note. “How appropriate, Jack. The last prize we took was carrying Madeira and cloth. That was two weeks ago.” She shook her head and sighed. “We still have the cloth.”

“Dare I hope that you won’t take it all, love?” Jack said. “If I have to sail me first command back to London with an empty hold, the East India Trading Company is not likely to be pleased. Can we…parlay?”

She turned to face him and smiled, a flash of white teeth in her tanned features. “What do you have to negotiate with, Mr. Sparrow?”

Jack bowed slightly. “Only my humble self, lovely pirate queen.”

“You? *Humble*?” She laughed out loud. After a moment, she sobered and thought for a moment. “I’ll take a third of the barrels. Plus half your spare canvas, and…” she paused to think. “How long have you been out?”

“We left Port Royal three days ago.”

“Ah, you’re fully stocked, then.” Her dark eyes gleamed, and she smiled happily. “I will also require ten hogsheads of fresh water, and a third of your bosun’s stores—”

“A third!” yelped Jack. Bosun’s stores referred to paint, line, sailcloth, and spars. “I’ll give you a fifth.”

“A quarter.”

“Very well,” he said, secretly pleased, but hiding it with a wounded grimace. “What else?”

She wagged a finger at him. “Don’t get top-lofty with me, Jack. I’m doing you a favor and you know it. Add in half your fresh fruit, plus two bags of biscuit and a cask of salt beef.”

Jack winced theatrically, but just for effect. “You have me over a barrel,” he said, with a slight bow. “Obviously. Well, now that we—”

Esmeralda pursed her lips. “Not so fast. I wasn’t finished.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “What else?”

“Your crew will carry it all over and place it in the hold of my ship, under my quartermaster’s direction. I don’t want my men seeing how much you’re carrying.” She thought for a moment. “And I am short on powder. I’ll need half of yours.”

“Half my powder,” Jack muttered. “That’s asking a lot. There are pirates in these waters, love.”

She nodded. “I’ll escort you until you reach Florida. No one will dare to challenge *Venganza*. After that, you’ll be on your own, but with any luck you’ll reach England without even sighting another vessel.”

“Done!” Jack said, relieved. “Thank you, love.” He held out his hand.

Esmeralda didn’t take it. She shook her head reprovingly. “I’m not doing this just for you. Since taking that prize carrying the Madeira, we’ve sailed a crooked wake for two weeks. They were all so drunk I thought I might have to make sail myself. I lost a good topman one night…never did find out if he went over the side himself, or had help.” She paused, then added wryly, “I don’t like having my crew strewn around, half of them passed out, the others puking their guts up because they can’t control themselves.” It was Esmeralda’s turn to roll her eyes. “Men.”

Jack had been aboard *Troubadour* when Teague had taken a cargo of rum, once. He remembered very little of the next few weeks. He nodded cheerfully. “Typical specimens of the male sex, darling. I swear, you women can’t live with us, can’t throw us to the bloody sharks.”

They both laughed softly.

“Did you proof the rum?” she asked. “If it’s been watered, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Traders and pirates knew that the most reliable way to determine whether rum had been diluted with water was to mix equal parts of rum and powder (small amounts were preferable), then touch a match to it. If the rum had been diluted, the match would go out. If the rum was pure, the mixture would light and burn.

Jack grimaced at her, amused. “Love, this is me. Jack Sparrow. You can’t for an instant suppose I’d forget to test the ruddy rum?”

“There is that,” she said. “Very well, we have an agreement.” She smiled at him, her smile turning tentative, almost shy. “Oh, and one more thing…”

“Oh, no, we agreed to all the terms,” Jack reminded her.

She looked down, and he could see color stain her cheekbones. “I also require…that you join me for dinner tonight. My cabin. Row over to *Venganza* after the cargo has been transferred and we’ve ungrappled.”

Only then did Esmeralda extend her own hand. Jack took it in his. Her palm and the undersides of her fingers were calloused from work and the grip of her sword, but the skin on the back of her hand was still as soft as he remembered. He bowed formally, then kissed the back of her hand. Her scent was sweeter than any perfume. He wanted to turn her hand over, to kiss her palm, then move upward, feeling the pulse in her wrist jump beneath his lips, and then he’d…

With a palpable effort, he made himself release her hand and step back. “Esmeralda, love, nothing would please me more, but I can’t risk it. Have you forgotten that I broke

the Code? What if one of your men saw me, recognized me, then went to Teague, and told him I'm sailing for the EITC? Teague would…" Jack hesitated, thinking. "I'm not sure what he'd do, but I'm positive I wouldn't enjoy it."

She looked at him closely, and Jack glanced away. "I don't think Teague would truly harm you, Jack," she said, slowly.

"I'd rather not chance it, love. Couldn't you row over here?"

"No," she said, flatly. "That wouldn't look right, and you know it. And if I'm aboard they'll exercise at least some restraint, celebrating their prize of rum. If I left, they might get so drunk they…" She shook her head. "You know pirates."

Jack did know pirates. And he was more than a little familiar with the effects of rum. "Is there anyone you can trust not to betray me to Teague?" he asked. "I could row over after dark, and make sure none of them gets a good look at me. If I had someone to bring me aboard and take me to you…"

"My first mate, Montoya," she said. "Luis is loyal only to me, as he was to my grandfather. You need have no fear, Jack. He will meet you and bring you to my cabin, and never say a word about it to anyone. I swear that you will be safe." She held Jack's eyes with her own. "Until dark, then. Do we have an agreement?"

Jack thought about the coming night, and gave in. "Done." He smiled at her, then added, honestly, "I shall be counting the minutes."

After the terms Doña Pirata had specified had been fulfilled, *Venganza* removed the grapples holding the ships together. The vessels drifted until they were a few hundred feet apart, then hove to again. The water was too deep to allow them to anchor.

The sun set in a blaze of Caribbean color.

Jack, having spent half an hour freshening up in his tiny cabin, appeared on deck in his best clothes and ordered a boat lowered. He explained to his waiting crew that the Lady Pirate had invited him to dinner, and that he hoped to convince her not to take the rest of their cargo and provisions. His explanation was greeted with a couple of knowing grins, but no one was bold enough to voice a comment aloud.

Leaving Robby in command, Jack rowed himself over to the frigate, enjoying the cooler breezes of the evening. On the western horizon, blushes of color—coral, rose, apple green, lemon—still tinted the sky, and he could see both Venus and Mercury. Venus blazed with a pure white spark, dominating the lapis bowl of the night, but she would soon sink down, over the edge of the world. Only the fingernail moon and the stars would be left to rule the heavens.

When he reached *Venganza*, Jack tied his boat to the ship, then, after pulling his hat low and his neckcloth up, he climbed up the ladder, over the railing, and stepped down onto the deck. Doña Pirata's second in command, a villainous-looking Spaniard named Luis Montoya, was waiting for him, as promised.

Jack inclined his head to the man, noting that he seemed sober. He glanced quickly around the deck as he followed Montoya to the ladder leading belowdecks. It was clear that Esmeralda's crew were enjoying their prize, swilling EITC rum with abandon. The deck was full of crewmen, but he was reassured to note that none of them paid him the slightest attention.

Jack's nostrils twitched at the smell of barbecued meat and his stomach growled; he realized he hadn't eaten since dawn. Someone struck up a lively tune on the hornpipe, and voices began singing in loud, and in many cases, slurred, Spanish. Jack recognized the tune. He knew the words to it,

though he knew it better in English. The scene before him was so familiar, so relaxed, so free….

As he descended the ladder, Jack reminded himself again that many of these roistering men were doubtless doomed to swing from a gibbet someday.

Montoya led him to the captain's cabin, then tapped on the door. "Enter," responded a voice. Her voice.

Montoya opened the door, and they went in.

Esmeralda's cabin, once her grandfather's cabin, was large and richly furnished. On the left there was a working space, where a good-sized table held writing implements and stacks of maps and charts. She was sitting there, charts spread before her. She glanced up as Jack entered, and slowly rose to her feet.

For their evening together, she had donned a rose silk gown, not too different in design from the one he had seen her wear that first time they'd spoken together in Shipwreck Cove, five years ago. Black lace edged the low-cut bodice, which was studded with jet beads that sparkled in the lamplight. Her hair was caught up with combs to hold it away from her face, but tumbled down her back, soft and wavy.

Montoya had hesitated in the doorway, and she flashed him a brief smile, and said, in Spanish, "Dinner may be served now, thank you, Luis."

Montoya bobbed his head, and left, closing the door behind him.

Jack moved toward her, mesmerized by the way she looked, by the rustle of the silk gown, by the scent of her perfume. "Blimey, Esmeralda, you look…" he searched for a word. "Ravishing, love."

She smiled, a playful smile that made her seem, all at once, like the fifteen-year-old girl who had thrashed him, then rubbed his face in the dirt. "Does that mean I am to be ravished, Jack?"

Her words and smile were deliberately provocative, and it took all Jack's self-control not to lunge at her then and there. But, recalling that Luis Montoya would doubtless be back any moment with their food, he merely smiled and said, "What man could deny you anything when you look so beautiful, darling?"

She laughed, a little breathlessly, and gestured to a chair. "Madeira?"

Now it was Jack's turn to chuckle as he sat down with her. "I thought your buccaneers drank it all."

"Not quite all. I saved the best. Captain's privilege."

She poured him a glass of the wine, then gathered up her charts, clearing space on the table. Jack studied the goblet, which was silver, chased with gold. "Very nice," he said, enjoying how the lamplight shone on the burnished surface. "Booty?"

"But of course," she replied. "A nice little Dutch brig we took a day's sail east off the Northwest Providence Channel. These belonged to her captain."

Then, her expression growing serious once more, she raised her goblet. "A toast, Jack. To the fair winds of fate that blew us together today."

Jack inclined his head. "To fate," he murmured, then they both sipped their wine. A moment later, there was a soft knock at the door.

"Enter," she said.

Montoya came in, carrying a tray. He set it down, nodded, then left. Esmeralda rose and locked the door. Jack sipped his wine, feeling his heart speed up.

"My cook made good use of your supplies, I see," she said, returning to the table and lifting the covers over the dishes.

"I know he did a better job than mine could have," Jack said, ruefully. "This smells delicious."

They fell to, eating with the appetite of two active people who hadn't broken their fast since the sun rose.

After they finished the meal, they cleared away the dishes and moved their chairs so they were sitting side by side in the cabin, lit only by a single lantern. Esmeralda had the luxury of having several casement-style windows that would open to provide ventilation. After such a hot day, the night air was cool and refreshing.

Jack gave his companion a sidelong glance, only to find that she was doing the same. They both hastily looked away. Jack racked his brain for something clever and amusing to say, but his customary gift of gab seemed to have deserted him.

Jack was accustomed to ladies of the evening, women who knew what they were being paid for, women who didn't need or want much in the way of conversation. Everything was understood, and they wanted to get right to work. Seduction wasn't something he'd had all that much experience with—and never with a woman like this. Esmeralda wasn't a chambermaid, or some lass who waited tables in a tavern. She was a pirate captain, a woman with power and authority. Talking to her most of the time was like talking to another man. And yet, he could never forget she was female.

It was true that they'd been together before, but that had been an entirely different situation. Five years ago, they'd been cornered, desperately hiding, forced into close quarters in the dark, together. They'd been terrified they'd be discovered, then giddy with relief when they weren't. Things had just…happened.

Esmeralda looked away from him, nibbling at her lower lip, clearly as unsure of her next move as he was. Jack took courage from that realization. He knew what he wanted. *Esmeralda's a lady*, he reminded himself. *The night is young. Patience….* And it was good just sitting here with her, sipping the excellent Madeira, for once not having to guard every word that came out of his mouth. He was keyed

up, there was no doubt, but in another way, he felt more relaxed than he had in years.

Because you're back with your own kind? he wondered. Then he sternly reminded himself that pirates were no longer his kind.

With the window open, they could hear the men laughing, singing, and dancing on the deck above. One song ended, and another rollicking tune began. It was the pirate ditty Jack had heard before. Its quick rhythm and ribald lyrics filled his mind, and he found himself humming, then actually singing along. Jack had a nice tenor, smooth and true. Esmeralda listened to him, tapping time, then smiled impishly at him and jumped to her feet. "I cannot sing," she said, breathlessly. "But I can dance!"

Picking up her skirts with a silken rustle, she began to dance. Her movements were a cross between those of a traditional Spanish dancer and a pirate's jig. She moved gracefully, her heels tapping the floor, her dark eyes flashing in the dim light of the cabin. Her black hair swirled around her shoulders, and she laughed and flung it back, then danced faster, keeping time with the music. Jack began to clap time as he sang. The music floated across the dark Caribbean Sea like cream-topped waves of cheerful sound.

Jack watched her, catching tantalizing glimpses of buckled shoes with red heels, and shapely ankles clad in black silk stockings. Finally, as the music wound down, she held out both hands to him, and he found himself up out of his chair, grasping her hands, as they whirled around. He was dizzy, not from the motion, but from the scent of her. She was wearing some exotic perfume that reminded him of an oriental garden.

The music stopped, and so did the dancers, both laughing, then moving closer together. They stood there, almost touching, their breathing coming fast, regarding each other in the dimly lighted cabin. He was just about to pull her closer and kiss her when she tensed, shook her

head, and stepped back. “Jack,” she said, her eyes glinting with mischief, “you don’t look at all like a man who belongs here, aboard a pirate ship! You look far too civilized.”

Jack chuckled. “Do I? If you knew the trouble I’d taken with my toilette, love, before rowing over here…what you see is the best I have.” His amusement at her comment was genuine, but he found himself wondering why she had retreated. Biding his time was growing more difficult, but he knew she was not a woman to push.

“I want you to look like *my* Jack,” she whispered. “I want *my* Jack here, not this civilized merchant officer!”

Moving forward, she put her hands up to his neck, and untied his neckcloth, pulling it free and dropping it on the table. Jack’s breath caught in his throat as she walked behind him and tugged at his best blue coat with the brass buttons, sliding it off his shoulders, then down over his arms. She hung it over the back of the chair. “Worst of all,” she murmured, “your feet. Sit down.”

Putting her hands against his chest, she pushed him down into the chair, then, before he could protest, she dropped down to kneel before him. Carefully, she pulled off one proper buckled shoe, then the other. She slid her fingers up, past his ankles, along his calves, and slowly peeled down his white knee stockings. Jack was silently glad that they were his best pair, and had no holes. The feel of her fingers sliding along his calves made his head spin.

He rose to his feet and pulled her against him, but before he could kiss her, she again skipped back, out of reach, then stood regarding him mock-thoughtfully. Jack felt his color rise as she scrutinized him, eyeing his waistcoat and loose-sleeved shirt with the cuffs edged with tattered lace. “Better,” she murmured. “Much better. But that shirt won’t do.”

Moving closer again, she carefully unbuttoned his shirt so it hung open halfway to his belt. Feeling the trails of her fingernails on his chest, Jack closed his eyes, fighting for

control. He couldn't just grab her; he sensed that would be a major mistake. *Is she trying to drive me mad?* he wondered, clenching his hands into fists.

Esmeralda's last "revision" of his appearance came when she reached over his shoulder and pulled loose the black ribbon tying back his hair, so it hung loose on his shoulders. He didn't move, hoping that this time she wouldn't step back. But she did, then regarded him, her head cocked to one side. Finally she nodded approvingly and smiled. "Now you look like my Jack once more," she said. "*My* Jack is a *pirate*. A beautiful pirate."

Jack's laugh was a bit shaken. "No, darling. The beauty stands before me."

She laughed, too, but there was an undertone of tension in it. "Flatterer. What is it your Obeah woman used to call you? The one you told me about? Ah, yes. Witty Jack."

He shook his head ruefully. Why in the world was she talking about Tia Dalma? "Tia Dalma isn't 'mine,' love," he corrected her. "She's her own woman, make no mistake. No man will ever possess her. She's…" he groped for words to express something indefinable he'd always sensed about the hoodoo sorceress. "She's…she…sometimes it seems like she wears her woman's body…the way you would wear a gown." He shivered. "She has power," he said. "Real power. She's no one I'd want to cross."

"Is she pretty?" Esmeralda asked, and he sensed a touch of jealousy in her voice, which he found immensely gratifying.

He shrugged. "She's…attractive…in certain ways. But not pretty, the way you are. *You* are lovely."

Why is she stalling like this? he wondered. His patience was eroding, but he sensed that she wasn't doing this to be coy, but for another, more personal reason. And somehow he knew that reason was important.

He gazed at her in the soft light. She was, indeed, beautiful. Her eyes looked huge and dark, for she had

outlined them somehow. There was a faint flush of color in her cheeks, and on her lips. In the years since he'd last seen her, she'd learned to enhance her appearance, the way women of her class at court did. "Your eyes," he said. "I love your eyes. The way you've enhanced them. What did you do?"

She smiled. "A little trick I picked up in the east. It's called kohl. They all outline their eyes there, in that part of the world, both men and women. The sun is so hot, and it helps protect against the glare off the water. It also helps prevent infections. You should try it, Jack. It would look wonderful on you. Let me show you."

After rummaging in a drawer, she returned with a small pot and a fine-tipped brush. "Hold still. Don't blink," she commanded, after dipping the brush into the dark substance. Jack did as she bade, and felt the brush glide along his lower lids. "Now close your eyes," she said. This time the brush touched his upper lids, each in turn, slipping smoothly along.

Esmeralda stepped back and nodded. "It looks very good on you, Jack," she said, after giving him an appraising glance. Jack looked into the mirror she handed him and was inclined to agree.

"Thanks, love," he said. "I like it. I'll have to remember this, next time I'm in the east."

"Oh, they sell it in Tortuga," she said. "You know Tortuga."

"I do," he agreed. "Port Royal has its charms, but it can't hold a candle to Tortuga."

Silence fell. Jack peered at her in the dimness, and realized she was trembling. Her eyes were suspiciously bright. "What's wrong, love?" he asked, gently. "I can see something is wrong. Tell me."

Esmeralda hesitated for a long moment. "I…I…" she broke off, then shook her head. "Perhaps this evening was a

mistake," she whispered. "It was such a long time ago. But…"

Jack held his breath, wondering whether she'd just open her door and tell him to leave, rather than give him the truth.

Finally, not looking up, she said softly, hesitantly, "Jack, that time we met in Barbados, I didn't know whether I ever wanted to speak to you again. The way you left that night, without saying a word to me. After…after we had been… together."

"But, Esmeralda, I explained it wasn't by choice!" Jack protested. "I was betrayed, I told you, just as you were. Just as Don Rafael was. It's not like I planned what happened! I couldn't help it. It was go with them or be killed out of hand by those rogues!"

She nodded, and half turned away. "I know. At least, my head knows that. But my *heart*…" she swallowed. "My heart remembers how I felt that next day, and it makes me angry. I know it's not fair, but you asked why I…" She broke off and shook her head impatiently. "I shouldn't have said anything." Jack drew in a breath, as, for the first time, he thought about what it must have been like for her. "No, I asked because I wanted to know, love."

Esmeralda looked down, twisting her hands together. "The next day, my grandfather ordered *Venganza* made ready to sail, saying on the morrow he planned to go rogue-hunting. I didn't know what to do. Finally, after I waited all day for you to appear, I dressed up in the cabin boy's clothes, and went to The Drunken Lady. And that's when they told me you'd run off with the rogues. I felt like…" She made a small gesture of tossing something away.

"Of course you thought that's what I had been planning all along," Jack said. He took a deep breath.

"Esmeralda," he said, softly, stepping close to her and reaching for her hand. She tensed again, but let him take it. He kissed her knuckles gently. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it

to happen that way.” He reached down for her other hand, and she yielded it to him. Jack began kissing her hands, short-nailed and strong from work, but they were well-tended and feminine. He could never have mistaken them for a man’s hands.

“After I left,” he muttered, between kisses, “I regretted I hadn’t said more when we parted, believe me. I cursed myself for a fool. I thought about you constantly, wondering what you were doing, whether I’d ever see you again.” Jack couldn’t remember the last time he’d spoken so honestly to another person. But he knew if there was ever a time for the truth, this was it. “Say you forgive me, love.”

“I do,” she whispered. “Oh, Jack! I didn’t want to be angry with you. But tonight, I couldn’t stop remembering that day.” She gave a short breath of a laugh, but there was no humor in it. “By the time I went to The Drunken Lady, it was a good thing for you that you were gone, Jack. I took my sword and my pistol with me. You know I have a temper.”

He ran his hands up her arms, then across her shoulders, and stepped closer. “I know you do,” he agreed. His arms tightened around her.

This time, she came willingly, her body soft, yielding. Her arms came up to twine around his neck. “I was angry with myself, too,” she admitted.

“Why, love?” he said, and smiled at her. “I assure you, you’re not the first person to think I might deserve shooting.”

Esmeralda laughed a little, and relaxed against him. “Because, even though I was still angry, when I saw you today, I…I wanted you. I was afraid if I said anything, you would be angry with me, and leave me—and then we wouldn’t have even tonight—this one night!—together.”

Jack let out a breath that was half rueful, half laughing. “No worries, love. We’ll have our night.” He bent to kiss her, and the taste of her mouth was every bit as intoxicating as the wine….

Later, much later, Jack lay on his back in the big bed, listening to Esmeralda's breathing as she slept, curled against him. It was a pleasant sound, he decided, far superior to the masculine snores that permeated the cabins and crew sleeping areas of most ships.

He was tired. It had been a long day. He was also sated…well, mostly. Jack found himself wishing that he could turn over, nestle against his bedmate and close his eyes, but he didn't dare. Before dawn touched the eastern horizon he had to make sure he was back aboard *Fair Wind*, leaving *Venganza* while he still had the darkness to cloak his features.

And at sunrise, he had to officiate at Captain Bainbridge's obsequies. Jack sighed. Not a pleasant prospect, especially in comparison to where he was now.

He turned over, propped himself on his left elbow, and, in the dim light of the lantern that they'd never gotten around to extinguishing, he regarded Esmeralda, noting the contrast between the pale curve of her shoulder and the inky tumble of her hair. He wanted to run his hand down her side, over the swell of her hip. But that would wake her.

Let her sleep a little longer, he thought. *There's still some of our night left.*

She stirred slightly, and as she moved, he saw a dark mark on her skin, just above her right hipbone. A bruise? Jack hitched himself up higher and leaned over to peer at it. His movement woke her, and she murmured his name softly, then added, "What is it?"

Jack couldn't honestly say he was sorry she'd awakened. "I saw this," he said, brushing a finger across the circular mark, "and thought at first it was a bruise. But it's not."

"No," she agreed. "It's a tattoo."

"What is it?" he asked, looking more closely. It was the size of a doubloon, and it seemed to be outlined in black, and filled in with red ink. Jack narrowed his eyes. It was some kind of grinning, stylized skull, surrounded by

geometric lines. “I never saw anything like that before. Did you have it when we…the first time?”

She smiled, teasing him. “What, you didn’t notice?”

“It was dark, love. Remember?”

“I do,” she said. “It was good, that time. But I liked tonight better.”

Jack laughed softly. “Danger did add a bit of a thrill on that notable occasion. But I agree. Tonight was—is—the best.” He leaned over and kissed her shoulder, then lifted her hair and kissed her neck, just below her ear. She shivered with pleasure, and he was tempted to just keep kissing her, and forget about the tattoo, but his curiosity was piqued. He pulled back and said, “So…the tattoo?”

She took a deep breath, and rolled over onto her right side, facing him. “I’ve never told anyone about it. The only people who knew I had it done are dead. My nurse and my grandfather.”

Jack realized this was something very private, and wondered whether she would continue. He didn’t speak, only waited. Finally, she said, “I had it done when I was fourteen. My nurse told me the story, and she had a drawing of this symbol on a scrap of ancient parchment. She was almost full-blooded Aztec. Her name was Azcalxochitzin.”

Jack stared at her in surprise. “You speak the Aztec language?”

One shoulder moved slightly, in a shrug. “Yes, she taught me. I wrote down the words, so I could remember them, because I don’t have anyone to practice speaking with.”

Jack studied her features in the lamplight. The dark eyes, swooping brows, high cheekbones—she seemed to have features that reflected her Castillian heritage. But her nose—it was high-bridged, and there was something exotic in the flare of the nostrils. “You have Aztec blood, too?” he asked, after a moment.

She nodded. “My mother was nearly pure-blood, like my nurse. She and my father were killed when I was five. I don’t really remember them. My nurse saved me. She plucked me from my truckle bed and hid me from the raiders, by crawling beneath my mother’s bed and holding me with one hand over my mouth.”

“Raiders?” Jack asked.

She bit her lower lip. “They told my grandfather it was a ‘native’ uprising. But my nurse had seen them. She told him that it was some of the neighboring dons, with their men, dressed up as natives. My grandfather was good to the native population. He didn’t enslave them, he allowed them to work his fields for fair wages. And he let his son marry a native girl when they fell in love. The dons were angry. My grandfather’s holding was rich. They coveted it.”

Esmeralda rolled onto her back, and clasped her hands behind her head. The new position caused such interesting changes in her anatomy that Jack almost forgot what she’d been saying. After a long moment she added, softly, “When the raid was over, he was left with almost nothing, save a ship, a few loyal servants, and me. That’s why he became a pirate, and that’s why he preyed on Spanish ships instead of sparing them. All his ships were named for his vengeance on the murdering nobles who took his kin from him. I was the only family he had left—a part Aztec child.”

“Do you have an Aztec name, too?” Jack asked.

She smiled, rather shyly. “Yes. I was named for my mother. Quiauhxochitl. It means Rain Flower.”

Jack smiled. “That’s beautiful.” He touched her hip again. “This…it’s some kind of sacred symbol?”

She nodded. “It’s an ancient design. The legends say it was imprinted on the blood money demanded by Cortés.”

Jack’s eyes opened wide. “Are you talking about the lost treasure? The one they say is on an island of the dead somewhere?”

She gazed at him, her eyes impenetrable. Jack could not read her expression, but he knew, by her sudden stillness, that she had said as much as she was going to say. Esmeralda had shared her most closely held secret with him—or part of it, anyway. The thought of treasure was enough to make Jack's pulse quicken, but he would respect her silence, at least for now.

After a moment, Jack got up, went over to the port, and looked out. He was reassured to see that the east was still dark. He could see dots of light, close by, that marked *Fair Wind*'s location. Her voice reached him, and there was a note of apprehension in it. "Is it dawn?"

He shook his head. "Not yet, love. We have time."

Jack returned to the big bed. "Do you remember," he said, "the day your grandfather sailed into Shipwreck Cove? You stood on the gangplank and looked at me…and I knew I had to meet you."

She laughed softly. "But first you had to clean your boots."

"Took me a bloody long time to do it, darling," Jack agreed, lightly. "But one doesn't meet the granddaughter of pirate nobility with used rum splashed on his boots."

"The whole time we were eating dinner," she said, "I was wondering whether I should talk to you. I thought you might hold our earlier meeting against me."

Jack raised an eyebrow and caressed her gently with one fingertip. She closed her eyes, breathing faster. Seeing her reaction, he touched her again, same place, moving his finger very slowly. "The only thing I wanted to hold against you, love, was myself." He smiled reminiscently. "Do you remember what happened after dinner? Hector Barbossa came in. I was glad to see his less-than-lovely countenance, because it meant we could stay together longer."

Esmeralda smiled. "How strange. We were sitting there, still almost strangers, thinking almost the same thing. I had already heard Barbossa's account. But I was content to sit

there and listen to him again, because I was sitting with you."

Jack remembered that moment, remembered Barbossa's scarred features beneath his huge, ragged black hat. *That dreadful scraggly beard...*He smiled, a slight, wry, smile. Barbossa was a character, he was. He'd never met anyone quite like him, either pirate or honest seaman.

Jack closed his eyes as the memories drifted through his mind, and, despite his resolve, he felt himself sliding into sleep. He sighed, thinking that he'd allow himself to doze for just a few seconds…perhaps just a few minutes….

Esmeralda snuggled against him, laying her head on his shoulder. Her motion woke him, and Jack roused. He didn't dare let himself fall asleep. Besides, the touch of her skin against his own reminded him that there were better things for a man and a woman to do in bed than sleep. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her close, and began kissing her again….

A little later, a final check at the open casement betrayed the slightest lightening of the eastern sky. Jack turned away from the port. "I'm afraid dawn's not far off, love," he said, quietly. "Time for me to be getting back."

She nodded, and forced a wan smile as he began gathering his scattered clothing. "Stay there," he said, as she sat up. "No need for you to get up, darlin'. We won't be getting under way until after sunrise."

"I take first watch," she said. "I like seeing the sun rise."

They dressed together in companionable silence. Jack finished just as she was tugging on her boots. "I should leave first," he said.

"Yes, you should." She glanced down, then back up, and managed a smile. "I'll wave to you when I sight the coast of Florida," she promised.

"I'll wave back," he replied.

Leaning over, he gave her a quick last kiss. "Take care of yourself, darlin'."

“I will,” she said. “And you…you do the same.”

“I will.”

Minutes later, Jack was rowing through the predawn grayness, bound for *Fair Wind*. When he reached the brig, Robby was there to give him a hand up, and help him raise the boat. “How did you find the Lady Esmeralda, Jack?” Robby asked quietly.

Jack merely smiled enigmatically.

“Oho,” Robby said softly, and said no more.

As the Caribbean sun edged up over the horizon, Jack, Robby, Tomlin, and the crew assembled on the weather deck. Captain Bainbridge’s body, sewn into its canvas shroud, was balanced on a wide plank that rested on the gunwale, held there by two sturdy sailors.

Jack looked around to see that the assembly was complete, then opened his mouth to begin the memorial service, only to hesitate in confusion, realizing that he wasn’t on a pirate vessel. He would have to speak the traditional words expected by honest seamen—and he didn’t know what they were. He’d never actually been inside a church during a religious service.

Every crewman’s head was bared; every eye was on him. Jack cleared his throat. Just then, a memory of standing outside a church once and hearing a service that was going on inside filled his memory. He recalled the words he’d heard the clergyman say. Clearing his throat, he announced, “Dearly beloved. We are gathered here, in the—”

Robby’s elbow jabbed him sharply. Jack broke off, glancing sideways at his friend. “That’s for a wedding,” Robby hissed.

“Oh…” Jack swallowed. “What do I say?” he demanded, sotto voce. Robby had been press-ganged aboard a merchant ship at the age of ten. Before that he’d been raised in the Church of England, attending services every week. Jack realized the second mate was grasping his well-thumbed Bible.

“Listen and repeat what I say,” Robby whispered back, and, closing his eyes, he began quoting.

Jack did as bade, and as the sun lifted into the sky, his words filled the dawn air. “I am the resurrection and the life…whosoever believeth in me…even though he shall die… yet shall he have life everlasting…”

Robby led him through the first part of the litany, then trailed off, and muttered, “That’s all I remember by heart, Jack. Want me to look up the rest?”

Jack nodded. “No, thanks. I’ll take it from here.”

He let his gaze travel over the assembled crew. “With these very traditional, very proper words, we, uh, consign our superior officer’s body to the water. The seawater. Salt water.” He groped for words, then brightened as inspiration struck. “Actually we do more than consign! We consecrate, most sacredly, the body of our captain to the waves. The peaceful, calm, blue waves. Captain Bainbridge will, uh, rest here. In the…the bosom, yes, the bosom of the waves. Of the blue seawater waves, here in the Caribbean Sea.”

Some of the men looked up during his speech, quizzically. Jack, perspiring, thought hard, and inspiration struck again. “Mr. Tomlin,” he said, “in recognition of your, um, profound feelings for our captain, I’d like you to offer the traditional…” he trailed off, searching for the word.

“Prayer,” whispered Robby.

“Exactly! The traditional prayer! If you will, Mr. Tomlin.”

Edward Tomlin’s narrow shoulders squared, and his voice, though trembling with emotion, was clearly heard as he began the *Pater noster*. Jack glanced sideways at Robby, who nodded fractionally, then jerked his chin at the canvas-wrapped form to indicate what should happen next.

When Tomlin finished, Jack nodded to the two sailors holding the plank. Together, they tipped it, and the body slid off the plank, and splashed into the sea. Jack took a deep breath. *Blimey, glad that’s over!*

Jack gave the helmsman their heading, then ordered the anchor raised, and all plain sail set. Then he dismissed the crew to their duties.

As his men scattered, and the ship filled with the bustle of getting under way, Jack stood there, alone, gazing off across the sea, his mind crowded with all the things he had to do. He was in charge, now.

It was his first command. He was captain, in fact if not in name. He had to plot a course that would take them north, past Florida, along the coast of the colonies; then, when they reached northern waters, they would turn east, heading for England. His course had to be plotted accurately, so it would bring *Fair Wind* across the Atlantic, so they could deliver what was left of their cargo to the EITC warehouse in London that was waiting to receive it.

In London, they'd pick up another cargo, and then head south, back to the *Fair Wind*'s home port of Calabar. Calabar was located on the Bight of Benin, midway down the western coast of Africa.

As soon as they were safely docked in Calabar, Jack would have to report to the EITC office there. He'd be required to provide a full report of all that had happened during the voyage to the manager of the EITC office. He would have to justify every decision, and submit his logbook for review.

The manager of the Calabar office of the East India Trading Company was actually the head of the entire midwestern EITC African division—one of the top three EITC men assigned to the continent. Jack had never met the man. When he'd been posted to *Fair Wind*, he'd waited outside the office while Captain Bainbridge received his instructions and the paperwork for the cargo.

The breeze freshened a bit, and Jack quickly reviewed the set of the brig's sails. Once he was satisfied with them, he went below, where his navigational charts awaited him.

As he spread out his charts, he found himself wondering whether the as-yet-unknown EITC manager would approve of the way he'd handled things aboard the brig. If he did, there might be a promotion in the offing.

Jack bent over the charts. *Captain Jack Sparrow.*

He liked the sound of it.

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Chapter Four
Cutler Beckett

The new Director of West African Imports and Exports for the East India Trading Company sweated as he worked, busily unpacking his new home office. Even though it was after sunset, the spacious room was still stiflingly hot and humid. The glass casements stood open, guarded by shutters that could be adjusted to regulate the amount of fresh air (and flying insects) flowing into the room from the quiet street outside. Every so often a draft of cooler air wafted through, as ocean breezes made their way up the hill from the harbor.

A young boy dressed in a miniature version of a male house slave's livery stood in a corner of the big room, steadily turning the crank that made the ceiling fan spin, but the temperature was still so warm that Cutler Beckett had, against his usual custom, removed his elegantly tailored coat. Even so, he was in danger of sweating through his embroidered silk waistcoat, so, before long, he reluctantly removed that, too. After doing so, Beckett took a few sips of cool spring water from the carafe on the sideboard, then mopped his face with his monogrammed handkerchief. He busied himself for a few minutes setting out his collection of miniature oriental jade netsuke carvings on the shelf behind the onyx- and mother-of-pearl-topped gaming table. Even this small exertion forced him to mop his face with his handkerchief again. Impatiently, he gestured at the slave, and the boy dutifully cranked the fan faster.

Beckett hadn’t observed the child covertly eyeing the carafe and swallowing thirstily. Like most gentlemen of his class, he noticed his expensive furniture, and was much more concerned with its welfare, than he ever noticed his slaves and house servants.

Faced with the actual labor of opening boxes and unpacking his most treasured books to add them to the built-in shelves in the office, the short, slightly built EITC official silently cursed the wretched climate of his new assignment. Angrily, he yanked off his silk neckcloth, then his powdered wig with its sausage-shaped side curls.

Only then, clad in just his fine lawn shirt and elegant knee britches, his short-cropped dark head uncovered, did Beckett feel capable of the exertion of prying open the wooden carton, taking out the packing straw, then beginning to remove the books themselves, dusting the leather covers and gilt edges before he placed each book on the shelves.

Next door, in the library, he could hear the bustle and low-voiced murmur as his housekeeper, Mistress Goodwright, supervised the household staff as they unpacked the majority of his book collection. Beckett decided he’d better check on their progress.

Opening the door, he went into the library, and, as he’d expected, found his comfortably plump, widowed housekeeper busily at work, dusting each volume the male house slave handed her, then handing it up to another house slave, who stood on the ladder to place the book on a high shelf.

“Oh, Mr. Beckett,” she said, apprehensively, “did you need something?”

Without replying, Beckett walked over to the large central table, and scanned the organizational diagrams he’d drawn up for the arrangement of the library. Then he motioned the slave down from the ladder, and climbed it himself, chart in hand. After surveying the books for a

moment, he swiped a finger across the top of one of the volumes, and turned to the housekeeper, pointedly holding up his finger to show the faint smudge. “A bit more care in the dusting, please, Mistress Goodwright.”

She gulped, and nodded. “Of course, Mr. Beckett. I shall be more careful, sir.”

Beckett began descending the ladder, then stopped, as a volume caught his eye on an already filled shelf. “This is misplaced,” he said, to no one in particular. “It belongs in my office.”

Mistress Goodwright nodded. “Yes, Mr. Beckett.”

Carrying the book, Beckett climbed back down the ladder, and returned to his office.

The office was a large, high-ceilinged room, whitewashed, with tan matting on the floor in lieu of carpeting. Beckett had many beautiful Oriental carpets, but he’d been advised not to place them on his floors. Africa had too many hungry insects, and the carpets were works of art. He couldn’t risk their becoming infested. So his treasured carpets, swathed in various protective layers, had perforce to remain in storage.

At least he had his desk and furniture. The desk, too, was a treasure he’d picked up while working for the East India Trade Company office in Bristol. He’d seen it unloaded from an EITC ship, special ordered for a wealthy merchant. He’d managed to convince the man to sell it to him instead, and had paid him a fair price for it. It had accompanied him to all his assignments since that time. It was made of ebony, with inlays of ivory and mother of pearl. The Oriental influence was clear, but the desk was not lacquered black—the ebony was its natural color, beautifully polished.

Cutler Beckett had been working for the East India Trading Company for almost a decade, starting at the age of eighteen. He’d begun his employment as a lowly assistant manager of shipping, and worked his way up to his present powerful—and well-paid—position. He was in charge of all

EITC shipping on the West Coast of Africa…hence his being posted to the Calabar office, which was centrally located on the African Coast, on the lower part of the “bulge” of West Africa. On maps it was labeled the Bight of Benin.

Beckett was in charge of overseeing the sales inventory carried by hundreds of EITC vessels. And Calabar was rapidly becoming the main port for the most valuable African EITC cargo…which, of course, was slaves. The Bight of Benin was popularly known as “the slave coast.”

Until very recently, the Portuguese had dominated the slave trade. But lately, England had begun to challenge them for the top spot. Beckett was determined to do his part to line the EITC coffers, and since the EITC top bureaucracy was composed of Englishmen, he was pleased that he could help not only his employer, but also his country.

He would also, he felt certain, be able to help himself. Over the years, Beckett had become expert at ferreting out the desires and secrets of wealthy, important men (and occasionally, women) and making himself very useful to them. He provided needed goods and services, and he knew how to keep his mouth shut. Immune to most human vices, he lived a life dedicated to the collection of wealth and power. Accumulating those things in sufficient quantities would, he knew, ensure that he eventually achieved his most cherished ambition—a title.

Cutler Beckett had dreamed of becoming a peer since he was a youngster. At first he’d longed for it because he wanted his father to smile at him, to approve of him—a goal he’d never achieved. As he’d matured, he’d come to realize that no matter what he did, his father and his brothers were never going to like him, or care about him. Basically, they despised him because he was small, tended to be sickly, and liked to read, rather than pursue “manly” pastimes such as riding to hounds or frequenting the gambling hells or bawdy houses. He’d never be able to gain their liking, much less their love. Not that he wanted it! He despised them as

much as they despised him. But if he had a title, by all that was holy, they'd respect him. Yes, and fear him too.

Not that his father had actively abused him, or beaten him. No. He'd done his duty by his unprepossessing youngest son, though he'd never understood why young Cutler wanted to read, to learn. When Cutler had, at the age of seven, asked to join the sons of the local aristocrats at their Latin lessons, conducted by an Oxford scholar who had been hired to tutor several of them, Beckett's father had bemusedly agreed. He'd even put the tutor, an older man named Angus MacFarlin, on stipend, and built a small schoolhouse on the grounds of his estate.

Cutler Beckett's gaze sharpened as he gazed down at the book he'd rescued from the library. It was one of his oldest, a gift from his tutor, the now long-dead MacFarlin. His mouth curved upward slightly as he remembered his old schoolmaster. *The best gift anyone ever gave me…*

Standing in his new African office, damp and sticky despite the spinning of the fan, memories surfaced as Beckett gazed down at the volume in his hand. For years it had been his most treasured possession. *My Lyfe Amonge the Pyrates*, by Capt. J. Ward. He'd read it many times, enthralled by the tales of adventure, bravery, and treasure. He recalled the day Mac-Farlin had given it to him…

Schoolmaster Angus MacFarlin finished writing the following day's lesson on the chalkboard, and then turned back to his three restless, titled students, who were groaning openly at all the pages of Virgil he'd assigned them to read. Only Cutler Beckett, not quite eight years old, and small for his age, didn't complain, but smiled. He'd been enjoying reading the *Aeneid*.

"Very well, young masters," MacFarlin said. "Class is dismissed for today. Do not forget to complete your reading assignment for tomorrow. Each of you will be required to

read aloud, and then translate a passage for the edification of your fellow students. Now, be off with you." His Scottish burr was faint, but still detectable.

Cutler kept his head bent over his book as the sound of trampling feet and young laughter ensued. The door to the schoolyard slammed, and silence fell. Even then, he did not move. Angus MacFarlin eyed him for a moment. "Are you all right, young Master Beckett?"

"Yes, schoolmaster," Cutler said. "I would just like to finish reading this chapter you assigned, please."

"Of course, laddie. 'Tis a pleasure to have a student who loves his book."

Cutler Beckett left his book open, resting his chin on his hands as if he were reading, but he wasn't. He'd finished the chapter last night. Instead, he let his thoughts roam free, daydreaming about how someday he'd acquire a title. *If I could become Sir Cutler Beckett*, he thought, *my father would be impressed. He'd be so pleased. He'd smile at me, instead of always frowning...*

Since the time of Cutler Beckett's grandfather, the Beckett family had been merchants, buying and selling goods from around the world. Old Raleigh Beckett had begun his rise to wealth as a cabin boy on a trading vessel. By the time he died, he'd acquired a fleet of ships, and sired three strong sons to inherit and expand the business. Beckett's father, Jonathan Beckett, had, in turn, sired three sons of his own. His eldest, Jonathan Jr., was his father's right-hand assistant. His second son, Bartholomew, served as Director of Shipping for the Beckett Trading Company. These days, the Beckett company, while no threat to the EITC in wealth and power, was one of the top five shipping companies in England.

The Beckett family was very wealthy—they owned a town house in London, a huge estate—Springhaven, in Somersetshire—their own private yacht, plus many tenant farms, mills, mines, and other properties scattered over

southern England and into nearby Wales. Ironically, the Becketts were far wealthier than most noble families. The one thing no Beckett had ever managed to acquire, and it wasn't for lack of trying, was a title.

I'll do something notable, Cutler Beckett thought, gazing unseeingly at the *Aeneid* in the small schoolroom. *Perhaps I'll grow tall, and become a soldier. I'll be an officer…a general! Or maybe an admiral. Admiral Sir Cutler Beckett. If I could do that, my father would be proud of me. He'd make my brothers stop saying he should have drowned me when I was born, the way you'd drown a runt pup….*

Cutler's elder brothers had been in their teens when he was born…a small, sickly baby that no one expected to survive. Young Cutler had surprised them all by living—and by being different. From his earliest years, he'd been fascinated by books and learning. Instead of struggling to master enough mathematics to handle accounting, and enough reading and writing to be able to write confidential business letters in a clear hand, as his older brothers had done, the youngest Beckett soon evidenced significant aptitude as a scholar. Only his sister, Jane, five years his senior, shared his love of books, and reading—though of course, being female, she hadn't been taught the other subjects that fascinated her little brother: history, geography, and studies of the classics written in their original Greek and Latin. Proper young ladies learned French and Italian, as well as embroidery, deportment, music, and drawing.

Young Cutler only came out of his reverie when his stomach rumbled loudly. Surely enough time had passed! Glancing up at the front of the schoolroom, he saw that MacFarlin was gone. He hadn't heard him leave.

The boy began gathering up his schoolbooks and slate, moving slowly and deliberately. He wished he could eat his lunch here, at his desk, while he read the next few pages of the *Aeneid*. As the boy walked toward the door, he

brightened, remembering that his father had agreed that he should begin private Greek lessons with Master MacFarlin, and that they would be starting today, in two hours. Cutler was eager to read about the adventures of Hector and Achilles in the original Greek.

The boy paused in the doorway. His gaze moved left, then right, while he counted slowly to fifty. The brick-fenced school yard was deserted. Over the top of the fence, he could see the older, mellowed brick of his mother's herb garden wall. All was quiet, serene, peaceful. It was late spring, and the warm sun, after a typical wet and chilly southern English winter, felt wonderful.

Reassured, Cutler Beckett stepped through the doorway and went down the three steps, hugging his books and slate against his thin chest. He wandered down the path, his mind's eye filled with images of waves of Greek warriors attacking the walls of Troy.

He never saw them coming.

The first indication that his fellow students had lain in wait for him came when a hard blow smashed into his back, and a voice screamed that hated nickname into his ear. "Cuttlefish! Cuttlefish, where were you? Did you think you were too good to play with us? Come on, cuttlefish! Let's play!"

Young Beckett fell forward onto the path, landing hard. He tried to get up, but another assailant—he thought it was Lord Wolsey's son, ten-year-old Richmond—was holding him down. All he could see was the boy's buckled shoes and stockings. He figured it had been the biggest of them, twelve-year-old Jeremiah, son of Sir Thomas Grahame, who had knocked him down. The third boy, also ten years old, was the young Lord Marcus Pangborne, he of the red hair, freckles, and foul mouth. Cutler could hear him, shouting curses and urging the others on.

"Hit him again! He's a bloody cuttlefish! Damn you, you stinking, slimy cuttlefish!"

A blow slammed into his left ear, making his head ring. Dazed, Cutler tried to curl up into a defensive ball, but they were all holding him now. A brutal hand grabbed his hair, yanked his head back, and a fist smashed against his cheek.

“Teacher’s pet! Makes us all look bad!”

Cutler knew he should fight back, should, at the very least, scream for help. Master MacFarlin might still be within earshot. But something strange seemed to have happened to him. He couldn’t make himself move or react. He couldn’t even blink. It was as though he’d gone somewhere else, outside himself, somewhere unconnected with his own body, which was now lying bloody and motionless on the path. Somewhere inside young Beckett’s mind, he was screaming and terrified, but that part of him seemed distant and unreachable.

Surprised and unnerved by his victim’s lack of reaction, Lord Marcus hesitated, the foot that he’d raised to kick Cutler suspended in midair.

“Stop that! What are ye imps of Satan doing?”

The hands that had been holding him down released him abruptly as Master Richmond and Master Jeremiah jumped up. Schoolmaster MacFarlin raced around the side of the schoolhouse from the direction of the privy, a lunch pail dropping forgotten from his hand. His Scottish burr was at full force in his agitation. The boys scattered, racing away, as the tutor flung himself down beside Cutler. “What have they done to ye, lad?” he said, gently touching the boy’s bleeding cheek.

Cutler Beckett finally blinked, and the world came back into focus. He was back in his body, and he hurt. Tears started from his eyes, but he would not allow himself to sob. Instead he slowly sat up, bruised and stiff, and allowed the tutor to tend to him, fussing over his injuries.

Carefully, MacFarlin helped the boy to rise, then escorted him into his little office, the only other room in the small schoolhouse building. There he poured water from a

ewer into a bowl and cleaned the blood from Cutler's face. After making sure the injuries weren't serious, he smeared an evil-smelling salve on the scrapes. Then, taking out a brush, he began whisking the dirt from the lad's clothes, though nothing could be done to salvage his torn knee stockings. All the while he carried on a soothing monologue, assuring young Cutler that he'd soon be "right as rain."

"'Tis a brave lad ye are, that's for certain," MacFarlin said, his burr still greatly in evidence. "I'll have a word with your parents myself, I will."

"No!" Cutler blurted. He grabbed MacFarlin's arm, holding it tightly. "Please, schoolmaster. Don't tell my parents. Please."

"But, whyever not, laddie? You did nothing wrong!" MacFarlin was plainly astonished by his pupil's vehemence.

"Please, you can't tell them," Beckett pleaded. "My mother…she's not strong. If she heard that I'd been hurt, she might have one of her spells. I don't want to make her worse."

"Oh, I see." MacFarlin thought for a moment. "I can talk to your father, then."

"No!" Cutler didn't realize he'd shouted until the schoolmaster flinched back. "Please, schoolmaster, it's… very important."

"Verra well, I won't mention that ye were attacked, laddie," MacFarlin said. "But from now on, it'll be only private tutoring lessons for you, Cutler my lad. There's no need on God's green earth for you to have to put up with attacks from great brutish lads like that." He leaned back and inspected Cutler's face intently with his faded brown eyes. "Why didn't you defend yourself, laddie? I swear, when I first ran toward you, I feared I had been too late, and they had done for ye. You were lying there, still as a statue."

Cutler shook his head, then wished he hadn't, when it throbbed. "I don't know, schoolmaster. I just seemed to…go away."

“Aye, well. ’Tis a good thing I had some reading to do, and brought my dinner with me today. ’Tis a pity they’re all scions of noble blood, or I’d speak to their fathers, too, and demand a good thrashing for all of them. Attacking a lad years younger than themselves! Only bullies and cowards behave in such a manner.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now…do ye think ye’ll be all right to go on to Springhaven and have your lunch? I’ll have a word with Miss Perkins about what has happened. I’ll leave a note for your father about the private lessons. I canna promise to lie, ye ken, but unless he asks me direct, I’ll not tell him.”

“Thank you, schoolmaster,” Cutler Beckett whispered.

MacFarlin held the boy’s gaze with his own, clearly troubled. “Laddie, are ye sure about this? Don’t ye think your father would want to know what happened today?”

Cutler nodded. “I’m sure, schoolmaster.” He took a breath. “My dad and my brothers…they don’t like me. At all.” He gulped again. “He’d be very angry that I didn’t fight back.”

“Against three boys bigger than yourself, laddie?” MacFarlin was plainly incredulous.

Cutler gazed at him, then nodded. There was nothing more to say.

After a moment, MacFarlin nodded. “I see. Verra well.”

The schoolmaster stood in thought for a long moment, then paced back and forth, clearly troubled. Finally, he shook his head, then went over to a shelf. Taking a book down, he stood there a moment, turning it over in his hands. Cutler saw that it looked new. “I have something here for you, lad. I was going to give it to you on your birthday, but I think you should have it now. I know you’ll enjoy it. You have a good imagination, and this is a book that tells of great adventures. It also has a lot of legends in it, legends about treasure.”

Cutler found himself reaching for it eagerly, his aches and pains forgotten. “Treasure?”

“Aye. Treasure.”

He placed the book in Cutler’s hands, and the boy read the title. *My Lyfe Amonge the Pyrates*. He looked up. “Who is Captain J. Ward?”

“Nobody knows, lad. Someone didn’t want to be recognized as the author, so he used what is called a pen name. I read it myself, and there’s no doubt that this J. Ward knows what he writes of, though. Pirates…bloodthirsty buccaneers and brigands, the lot of ’em. But they make for fascinating reading.”

Cutler’s fingers traced the leather cover, with its inlay of gold. “Thank you, sir.”

Schoolmaster MacFarlin held out his hand, his voice becoming more formal, losing the Scottish burr. “Now come along, lad. I’ll walk you back to Springhaven, and we’ll find your governess…”

Cutler Beckett blinked, as the sudden tide of memory receded. It had been years since he’d thought of Master MacFarlin and the little schoolhouse. His schooling had been so much better after that day. He’d enjoyed his private lessons, and sometimes his sister Jane had come along with her needlework to keep him company and listen to his recitations. They’d practiced their French together, because Master MacFarlin frankly admitted that, although he could read French nearly as well as he could read English, his Scottish accent made his spoken French nothing any student should emulate. Jane had always laughed whenever MacFarlin used a French phrase. Her French had been flawless…

Beckett’s mouth tightened. The day he’d landed in Calabar and walked up from the harbor to the EITC office, he’d found a stack of mail waiting for him. Most of it was

business mail, of course, but half a dozen letters were personal. Against their father's orders, Jane had written to him secretly for years. After the death of their mother, Cutler had promised her that she could join him at his next posting. He knew she hated their father almost as much as he did.

There had been indeed been several letters from Jane, which he'd read eagerly, but as he'd worked his way through the stack, there was also one with a telltale black border, bearing unfamiliar handwriting. Beckett had opened it to find that it had been penned by his cousin, Susan. Sometime during the time he'd been en route from his previous EITC posting in Nippon, the port of Edo, Jane had died from a fever. His last link with his family back in England…gone.

Cutler Beckett cleared his throat, then shook his head, chiding himself for woolgathering when there was so much work to be done. After dusting the book, he placed it on the shelf—

—then, frowning, pulled it back. *Wait a minute. Wasn't there a legend about western Africa?* Walking over to his desk, he sat down and opened the book, turning the pages carefully until he reached the proper place. *Ah, yes. I remember. Kerma, the fabled lost island where the children of Kush went, when they departed from their city of Old Kerma near the third cataract of the Nile…*

Quickly he reread the legend, and studied the hand-tinted illustrations "Captain Ward" had drawn depicting some pieces of Zerzuran jewelry Ward claimed to have seen. At first glance, they resembled some of the Egyptian pieces Beckett currently had in his collection of ancient jewelry and weapons, but there were some important stylistic differences. There was an enameled pectoral depicting the stylized face of a lion, the Kushites' heathen god, Apedemak. It was copper, lavishly inlaid with gold and silver. There was also a dagger with an iron blade, most

unusual for the period, when most blades had been forged from bronze. The hilt was plated with precious metals, copper and gold, and the end of the hilt bore a reddish cabochon gem. A ruby, or a garnet, perhaps…Lastly, there was a golden armlet, clearly designed for royalty, decorated with gems and enamelwork in the distinctive style of Kush.

Now that I'm here in Western Africa, I can add to my collection of ancient artifacts, Beckett realized. For years he'd collected weapons, amulets, and jewelry. He even had a few pieces purportedly taken from an Egyptian royal tomb.

Of course, Cutler Beckett didn't go out and search for such treasures himself. He was far too busy, and dealing in antiquities meant dealing with tomb robbers and thieves. Not the class of people a gentleman would wish to encounter. *I need to look for a new operative*, Beckett thought. *The chance that I could find artifacts from Kush—or even Zerzura!—makes finding someone a priority.*

Cutler Beckett actually had many operatives in his pay, men in important foreign ports who kept an eye on developments and reported to him. He had a web of informants funneling him information at all times. Information was his lifeline.

And for local "business," especially any problems that might arrive, Cutler Beckett always had someone in his employ to be his eyes and ears in the seamier sections of town. He'd had such men before, men who acted as both spy and enforcer. But his most recent operative, a former spy for the Crown named Gates, had never returned from the last "errand" Beckett had dispatched him to do, in Nippon. Beckett had reluctantly concluded that the man had been killed—which wasn't too surprising, since more than a few of his assignments had involved violence, either covert or overt. Within days of Gates's disappearance, the news of Cutler Beckett's promotion and transfer to Africa had arrived, and Beckett hadn't had time to engage anyone else

before leaving. Then it had taken more than six months at sea for his vessel to reach Calabar.

Beckett resolved to begin his search for his new operative the next day. Men like that were not easy to find. They had to be intelligent, informed, dedicated, trustworthy, and utterly ruthless. Even before he could find and hire his local operative, he'd make sure the word got out about his interest in the acquisition of information about treasure legends, and, hopefully, antique artifacts, from Africa. The entire continent was riddled with such legends, he recalled. But it was the legend of Zerzura that had interested him the most as a lad.

Once Cutler Beckett set his mind to do something, he proceeded with dispatch and efficiency—focused, cold-blooded efficiency. It didn't take him long to adjust to the demands of his new job, and to ensconce himself in the European community that was growing in Calabar. Most of the Europeans were, of course, men, on assignment there for their jobs. Given how unhealthy the climate of Africa, even here on the coast, often proved to whites, few of the wealthy and powerful gentlemen chose to endanger their families by bringing them to the port.

That meant there was a market for "companions" for many of them. Cutler Beckett found himself doing a brisk side business in light-skinned female concubines. He was discreet and prompt and his prices, though steep, were reasonable, given the quality of the product he was selling. Not all of the women were African, though, of course, many were. Slavery as an institution had been around as long as any form of human civilization, Beckett suspected, and African slaves were just the newest, largest supply of them to be had.

He also did "favors" for powerful men, asking for no payment. He assured them that he was happy to be of service—and he was. Having wealthy, powerful men that

owed you, that required your discretion and continuing silence, often paid off in many ways.

The highlight of Beckett's first three months in his new job was a visit from his immediate supervisor, the EITC's Director of African Affairs, Viscount, Lord Reginald Marmaduke Bracegirdle-Penwallow. Lord Pen-wallow had his own EITC ship, the schooner *Albatross*, and spent most of his time traveling from one African EITC port to another. Since Calabar was rapidly becoming the African trade's busiest, most lucrative port, Beckett had known that he could expect to see him frequently.

Even though they'd never met before, Beckett knew quite a bit about Penwallow. He'd made a study of the man, and his achievements within the EITC, because Penwallow had once rescued him from a very sticky situation. On the day that the *Albatross* first docked in the harbor of Calabar, a gasping runner sent up from the docks informed him of its arrival within minutes. Quickly, Beckett changed his everyday coat and waistcoat to his best ones, and then changed his everyday wig to his most elaborately curled and powdered one.

On his way downstairs, he sought out Mistress Goodwright, to inform her of his honored guest's arrival, instructing her to have an excellent dinner prepared, and the best wines brought up from the cellar. Then, clapping his best black tricorne on his head, Cutler Beckett walked out his front door, and climbed into his calash. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, so the coachman had folded the top back, leaving the vehicle open to the air. The open carriage was drawn by Beckett's best team, the well-matched grays.

As he settled himself on the well-padded forward facing seat, Beckett gave his slave driver, known as Benjamin, a sharp glance, to make sure the man was well turned out in his finest livery, then also checked out the footman, a youth they called Cyrus, as he closed the calash's door. Both passed muster; Beckett gave the signal to drive on. Cyrus

swung himself up behind the carriage as it rolled forward. They barreled down the hill toward the docks, the grays stepping along smartly.

It was usually Cutler Beckett's custom to walk to the docks for exercise, or to ride one of his horses if he had an errand outside of the main part of town. Just as he was abstemious about food and drink, he believed in the virtues of a healthy constitutional each day. But under the circumstances, appearances must be preserved.

When Beckett reached the *Albatross*, he was in time to welcome Pen-wallow as the official debarked from his vessel and stepped cautiously down the gangplank, steadying himself with a gold-topped walking stick. He was flanked on each side, though not touched, by stalwart seaman, ready to catch him, should he stumble.

Beckett regarded him covertly, not wanting to stare. Lord Penwallow was a portly man who was dressed in the height of fashion, even in Africa's heat. His coat was of turquoise silk, so bright it nearly glittered in the morning sun. His matching turquoise hat was bedecked with white plumes. Penwallow's complexion was florid beneath his elaborate white wig, and his face shone greasily with sweat. White powder sprinkled the shoulders of the turquoise coat. He was tall and rotund, but a trifle bowlegged in his white britches, as though he'd spent much time riding to hounds in his youth.

When his supervisor reached the relative stability of the dock, Beckett stepped forward, bowing courteously. "Lord Penwallow, welcome to Calabar. Cutler Beckett, at your service, sir."

Penwallow lifted a pince-nez and regarded his subordinate curiously. His eyes, in his florid countenance, seemed small within the folds of flesh, but they were sharp and a very bright blue. "Mr. Beckett," he replied, nodding congenially. "Thank you for your gracious welcome. It is good to be back on land, here in Calabar." His voice was

oddly high-pitched for such a large man. As he took a step forward, Penwallow staggered. Only the quickness of one of the seaman, who steadied him, then quickly stepped back, kept him from falling. Penwallow chortled at his own gaucherie.

“God’s nightgown, this always happens! Two months at sea, and I lose my land legs.”

Beckett bowed again. “Completely understandable, Lord Penwallow, happens to me, too.”

Within minutes, Penwallow was ensconced on the comfortable seat of the calash, and they headed back up to the house.

Following an excellent dinner, and several glasses of wine, the gentlemen retired to the library to sip their port. Penwallow lit up a clay pipe, and puffed away, closing his eyes with contentment. “Ahh…good. I never smoke while aboard, would set a terrible example for my staff. ’Tis good to be back on solid ground, if only for the pleasures of fresh food, good port, and good tobacco.”

Beckett, who did not smoke, regarding it as nasty vice, smiled graciously and nodded. “Indeed, Lord Penwallow. And may I hope that you will see fit to grace us here in my humble home? I’ve had the best suite prepared.”

“Thank you, thank you, I shall,” Penwallow said. “You have done very well, Beckett, very well indeed, at outfitting your home. You have some lovely things.”

“I try to keep my living arrangements…civilized…my lord, no matter where the EITC sends me. Since I plan a lifetime of service, it is well to have the ability to make a home anywhere.”

“Excellent, excellent, Beckett! It is good to hear that you plan to stay with us. Your work has been exemplary to date.”

“My lord,” Beckett hesitated for effect, and then cast his eyes down, humbly. “I assure you it’s the least I may do to repay the generosity you showed me all those years ago.”

“Tut, tut, my boy…” Penwallow waved his hand dismissively. It was the one holding the pipe, and smoke made a trail through the air. *I’ll have to make sure to have the whole library aired and cleaned*, Beckett thought, making a mental note to speak to the housekeeper when Penwallow decamped.

Stealing a quick glance at his superior, seeing that he was smiling benevolently, Beckett drew a deep breath, making sure it sounded just a bit ragged. “Sir…I would like to take the liberty of formally thanking you once again, this time in person, for your rescue of me ten years ago. To put it bluntly, you saved my life, when my family refused to come to my rescue, in effect casting me off. If it were not for your order that resulted in my being freed, I shudder to think what would have happened to me. The EITC invested a goodly sum in me, a new and unproven employee, and it happened all by your order. I have always endeavored to make sure the company has been well repaid for its investment, my lord.”

Penwallow, who had just taken a sip of port, waved a beringed hand at his companion affably. “Pish and tosh, Beckett! You repaid the EITC its actual outlay within a remarkably short period of time, and since then, you have been responsible for numerous profitable ventures, too many to detail. Here’s to you, Beckett,” Lord Penwallow said, raising his port glass again, and saluting his subordinate.

Cutler Beckett cast his eyes down again, the very picture of a modest young man who was nearly overwhelmed at receiving the praise of a superior. “My lord…may I only continue to prove worthy of such sentiments.”

The two men talked about business for the rest of their afternoon and evening together. Beckett realized that Penwallow was a shrewd man, capable of adding large columns of figures in his head, and deriving percentages

without pen and paper. Unlike many other high-level EITC officials Beckett had met, he seemed honest in his dealings, if not particularly insightful or creative. He was also, judging by the way he went on and on about them, a devoted family man.

Cutler Beckett had learned long ago that personal information about one's associates (especially one's superiors) often proved very useful. So he asked many questions about Penwallow's family. The older man, pleased at his genuine interest (which he erroneously perceived to be good-humored and harmless) told his subordinate all about his beautiful estate in Surrey, and then the sugar plantation he'd recently purchased on the island of New Avalon, just north of Cuba. He happily produced ivory miniatures of his wife, the Lady Hortense, and his children, Anna and Frederick—plus Anna's children, Sally, Marvin, and Christopher.

It was clear that Penwallow's twenty-three-year-old son, Frederick, was the apple of his eye. The viscount went on and on about Frederick's good looks and his skill at riding to hounds, and he genially confided to Beckett that his son was considered one of the most eligible bachelors in England.

By the time Penwallow finally ran down about his family, and how much he missed his home, Cutler Beckett knew a great deal about him. He knew, for example, that Penwallow was no more than a social drinker. He'd never indulged to the point of embarrassing himself. Nor had he pinched any of the attractive housemaids or leered at any of the young wives he'd been introduced to. So…he wasn't a drunk, nor a ladies' man.

But…it was clear that Penwallow dearly enjoyed the occasional game of chance. Beckett resolved to organize a "gentlemen's gathering" in honor of His Lordship's visit, so he'd be able to gauge His Lordship's skill at cards, dice, and so forth.

Beckett also realized that Lord Penwallow might well be his ticket to a title. It was clear from everything the man said that he wasn't just name-dropping when he mentioned people he knew at court. He obviously was held in high regard by the EITC top management, as well as nobles in high places.

Lord Penwallow enjoyed his visit in Calabar so much that he extended it by more than a week. By the time Cutler Beckett had seen his guest off at the dock, and the sails of the *Albatross* were filling with wind as it glided out of the harbor, Beckett knew he had made a valuable contact in his quest for elevation in the EITC. And with a high position would come money and power—more power.

Soon, he told himself, *soon I'll be able to go back to Somersetshire, and drive through the gates of Springhaven. I'll knock on the door, and when the butler answers it, I'll instruct him to announce me to Father, Jonathan, and Bartholomew as Sir Cutler Beckett.*

The thought of his father and his brothers' reaction when their titled relation walked into the room made his mouth curve upward. *And after I see the envy in their eyes, and watch them try to figure out how to ingratiate themselves with me, then I'll have the pleasure of giving them the "cut direct," the worst insult high society allows. I'll stare at them as though they'd crawled out of a cesspool, then I'll turn my back and walk away, climb back into my carriage and drive off. And I'll never see them again…*

Cutler Beckett smiled, and this time it was a genuine expression of pleasure, having nothing to do with his customary gracious, humble smile—the one he could summon so readily upon necessity. No, this smile was his real smile.

It was not a pleasant expression.

The next two and a half months passed busily for Beckett, as he worked hard, settling into his new position and new life. He held a number of pleasant soirees and “game nights” for the local European community. He interviewed and found an “operative” to replace the lost Gates. It was good to have his finger on the pulse of what was going on in Calabar, and surrounding areas. He let it be known that he was in the market for valuable artifacts of native manufacture.

Beckett did many “favors”—both paid and unpaid—for the local notables. His reputation as the man to go to if one wanted things done quickly and discreetly grew, and many wealthy men sought favors from him.

He even, after a fashion, managed to grow accustomed to the climate.

One day, a runner arrived from the docks to inform him that an EITC vessel, the brig *Fair Wind*, had just docked. It seemed that two men, the first and second mates, had disembarked and were on their way up to the EITC offices to report in. Beckett checked his records, and saw that *Fair Wind* was listed as being under the command of one Nathaniel Bainbridge.

Slightly intrigued by this minor mystery, Beckett put aside the work he’d been doing, ordered his secretary to bring him a cup of tea, then sipped it and sat back in his padded seat in his EITC office, waiting. This office was dominated, as were all his offices, by an enormous map of the world affixed to the wall behind him.

He did not have to wait long. His secretary, Chalmers, came to the open door and said, “Mr. Beckett, sir, First Mate Jack Sparrow and Second Mate Robert Greene to see you, sir. They are crew aboard *Fair Wind*, which has just docked.”

Beckett regarded the skinny, sallow-faced man unsmilingly, and nodded. “Very well, Chalmers, you may show them in.”

Moments later, Beckett's nostrils caught a whiff of salt air, tar, and none-too-clean human, as two men entered the office. Cutler Beckett leaned back and studied them for a moment as they doffed their tricornes and came to a halt before his big oak desk.

The first one to enter was of medium height and build, with very dark hair that was pulled back and tied with a ribbon. He moved with a confident air…almost too confident, Beckett decided. The newcomer was somewhat younger than Beckett himself, perhaps in his mid-twenties. He sported a worn, dark blue coat that had seen better days, though to Cutler Beckett's observant eyes, it was clear that some effort had been made by its wearer to brush it and clean the worst of the stains. His neckcloth was of old linen, somewhat yellowed, and his snuff-colored britches were worn gray along the seams. His knee stockings made the fastidious Beckett wince inwardly, but the silver buckles on his shoes had been buffed to a dull shine. Clearly, the man had taken some pains with his appearance, after months at sea. Beckett gave him points for that.

Beckett studied the man's face for a moment, as the sailor essayed a small, tentative smile, revealing the flash of a gold tooth. *Regular features…a good chin. Dark, eyes, steady and clear. One might almost call him…good-looking. Except for the dirt, of course.*

Beckett deliberately let the moment stretch on, studying the newcomer, his stance, his reaction. The man stood still, not dropping his gaze. There was considerable intelligence in his eyes. *Nothing slow about this one*, Beckett decided. *He looks as though he can think on his feet. Confident… even a bit cocky? Still, there's that smile…*Beckett found that faint, hopeful smile rather charming…it belied the arrogance nicely.

Shifting his gaze to the other man, Beckett stared at him measuringly.

Unlike the first chap, this one ducked his head and dropped his blue eyes, plainly nervous. He was quite young, perhaps not even twenty. He had curling golden hair tied back, and fresh, handsome young features, despite the weathering from sun and wind.

After a long pause, Beckett spoke. “Good morning, gentlemen. I am Cutler Beckett, Director of West African Imports and Exports for the East India Trading Company. And whom do I have the pleasure of welcoming today?” He kept his voice pleasant, but he saw that the faint touch of sarcasm wasn’t lost on the first man.

“Good morning, Mr. Beckett, sir,” the dark-haired man replied. “I’m First Mate Jack Sparrow, and this is my second mate, Robert Greene. We just arrived back in Calabar aboard *Fair Wind*, and knew it was our duty to come up to the office and report in.”

“Ah.” Beckett let the syllable hang in the air for a moment, and then added, “And where, pray tell, is Captain Bainbridge?”

“I’m sorry to have to inform you, sir, that the captain died while on our voyage. As first mate, I stepped in and have been acting as captain,” Sparrow said carefully, in what was obviously a rehearsed explanation.

Beckett mulled this over for another moment, before relenting. “I see…most distressing. Captain Bainbridge had been sailing for us for nearly ten years.” As an afterthought, he waved at two straight chairs. “Take a seat, please.”

The two men sat down. It was obvious they weren’t used to sitting on chairs in offices, but within a moment, Sparrow had made himself comfortable, unlike Greene, who perched on the edge of the chair, rigid as a post.

Beckett looked back over at Sparrow. “Obviously, I shall need to see your logbook, Mr. Sparrow.”

Sparrow promptly leaned forward and deposited a thick, grimy, leather-bound book on Beckett’s desk. “Right you are, Mr. Beckett, I figured you’d ask to see the log, so I

brought it along." He sat back in his chair, relaxed as a cat in a patch of sunshine, and flashed another, wider, smile at his employer.

"Thank you," Beckett said, dryly. "I shall peruse it with great interest. But first, I would like to hear the entire story of what happened from you two." Steepling his fingers, he waited.

Moments went by. Greene glanced sideways at the first mate, but said nothing.

"Yes, well…" Sparrow cleared his throat. "About Captain Bainbridge, sir, what happened was that…"

Beckett listened as Sparrow, with occasional assistance from Greene, recounted the story of the day *Fair Wind* encountered the pirate vessel *Venganza*. The man was fairly concise, and his account of events held together. Sparrow concluded his summary by explaining that he had sailed the brig to London, and off-loaded the two-thirds of remaining rum there. Then he had given a written account of the events, plus a list of everything the pirates had taken, to officials at the London EITC office. They, in turn, had ordered him to report back to *Fair Wind*'s home-port of Calabar, and had loaded the brig with a cargo of muskets and pistols. Firearms were in great demand in Africa.

Beckett listened intently, unmoving. When Sparrow reached the end of the report, Beckett regarded him unblinkingly. The entire story undeniably made sense, and held the ring of truth, yet…Cutler Beckett couldn't shake the sense that First Mate Jack Sparrow was holding something back.

After Sparrow fell silent, Beckett observed him for a long moment, and then said, "Explain to me, if you please, Mr. Sparrow, why the pirate captain of this frigate didn't take the entire cargo of rum?"

Sparrow cleared his throat and shifted, obviously ill at ease. Beckett glanced from him to Greene, just in time to see a flash of humor in Greene's eyes, before the blond man

looked back down. Beckett had a sudden feeling that if Sparrow had been a less assured man, he might have been blushing beneath that tanned skin. “Mr. Greene?” Beckett said, abruptly, “why didn’t the pirate captain take all the rum after he attacked and killed Captain Bainbridge in this swordfight?”

Greene started visibly, and flushed. “Oh, well, Mr. Beckett, sir,” he said, turning his tricorne around in his big, work-roughened hands, “you see, the pirate captain was, well…she was a woman.”

“A *woman*?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Beckett, sir. Mr. Sparrow didn’t want to say nothing disparaging about Captain Bainbridge, but that’s what set the captain off, and drove him to attack her. The captain couldn’t stand the idea of a woman commanding a ship, even a pirate vessel. So…he went for her. But she didn’t kill him. She just…played with him. You see, the captain…he drank. Usually just at night, but that morning, he was in his cups, Mr. Beckett, sir, to be frank about it. Between the drink and the sun…” He tapped the side of his forehead meaningfully, and shrugged.

“I see…” Beckett said. “Is this true, Mr. Sparrow?”

“Yes, sir,” Sparrow said, clearly not happy having to admit the truth. “I hoped that fact wouldn’t have to become public knowledge, sir, because when I docked in London, the EITC office there put me in a carriage and ordered me to go see Captain Bainbridge’s family. So I could tell them…he was gone.”

Sparrow took a breath. “I did as ordered, sir, only I just told Mistress Bainbridge that her husband had been killed in a swordfight with a pirate who was attacking his ship.”

Beckett raised an eyebrow.

“It was the truth, Mr. Beckett,” Sparrow said, and Beckett could hear a defensive note in his voice.

“Why did you give Bainbridge’s family this…edited… version of the truth, Mr. Sparrow?”

“There was no reason to tell them the whole story. I thought giving them the…edited…story would leave them with a better…memory…than having to say the captain keeled over from an apoplexy because he went mad from drink and sun and tried to attack a female pirate—who could have run him through at any moment, but chose not to.”

“I see,” Beckett murmured. He switched the full force of his gaze back to Robert Greene. “But Mr. Greene, that still doesn’t explain why this female pirate chose to steal only one third of the EITC’s rum.”

“Oh,” Greene said. “Well, Mr. Beckett, Jack—er, Mr. Sparrow—he talked her out of taking the whole cargo.”

“He did? That’s…interesting.” Beckett’s stare never wavered from the now-sweating Greene. “And what about Mr. Sparrow did this woman find so convincing, eh?”

Greene shrugged helplessly. “Mr. Sparrow can be very persuasive, sir. Especially with the ladies.”

By now Beckett was amused, but he didn’t let it show. “Indeed?” He shifted his attention back to Sparrow, locking eyes with the first mate. “Is this true, Mr. Sparrow?”

Jack Sparrow blinked and swallowed, but after a moment, he straightened his shoulders and met Beckett’s gaze directly. “I…well, I believe you could say that, Mr. Beckett. I did talk to Doña Pirata, and she did agree that she really didn’t need all of that rum. She mentioned that she’d recently captured a large cargo of Madeira. So I guess she figured she didn’t need more spirits aboard. She told me her men had been…um…the worse for drink ever since they’d taken the cargo of wine.”

“Very well,” Beckett said, and finally broke their locked stare. He reached over and picked up the battered logbook, using only the tips of his fingers, and deposited it in his desk drawer, first wrapping it in a cloth so it wouldn’t get the drawer dirty. “I will review your accounts, and I’ll be talking to some other crew members over the new few days. For now, Mr. Sparrow, Mr. Greene, you are dismissed.”

Greene was up off his chair in a moment, and Beckett could tell he was barely restraining himself from bolting out the door. Sparrow, on the other hand, walked to the door with a slow, assured gait that was perilously close to an arrogant strut. “Close the door when you leave, please,” Beckett called after him. *Definitely cocky*, he decided. *This Sparrow might need taking down a peg or two….*

The door shut.

Beckett sat for a long moment, until he was sure they were gone, before he allowed himself to chuckle.

That afternoon, Beckett interviewed Third Mate Edward Tomlin, and, after him, two other crewmen, about what had happened on the day Bainbridge died, as well as their subsequent voyage back to Calabar.

That evening, as he ate his solitary supper at his massive dining table, Beckett read Jack Sparrow’s log entries about the voyage. He was particularly interested in a page that had been carefully cut out of the logbook. The missing page had been one of the last in the book, which had many still-blank pages, but Cutler Beckett missed very little. After a moment of regarding the neatly cut edge, he ran his fingers over the blank page that would have rested beneath the missing page. There were faint indentations.

Beckett rose and went to his office, then took a box of pencils from his ebony desk. He sharpened one with his penknife. Then he returned to the logbook, and with light, sure strokes, he drew the pencil lead sideways over the page. The faint indentations left by Sparrow’s quill showed white against the gray of the pencil’s lead.

Captain Jack Sparrow…Captain Jack Sparrow…Captain Jack Sparrow…

Cutler Beckett counted. It had been written no less than twenty-three times, in various sizes and styles. Some of them were block letters, others in Sparrow’s own rather nice penmanship. At least one of the names and its accompanying titles was not only in block letters, it was in

all capitals. Beckett pursed his lips, then laughed softly. “Jack, Jack, Jack…” he said. “I’ve caught you, Jack. I know what you want.”

Beckett took out his penknife, prepared to slice down the edge of the page, so he could remove it from the logbook. But after a second, he stopped, then, smiling, he simply closed the logbook and tied it shut, wrapping it back in the cloth. Sparrow was an arrogant fellow, if an interesting one. Wouldn’t hurt him a bit to discover at some point that he’d been outsmarted by his superior.

The next day, Beckett summoned Sparrow to meet with him in the afternoon, in his private home office.

Sparrow arrived at the appointed time, and was shown in. The servant announced his presence at Beckett’s office door, then stepped aside to allow him to enter.

Sparrow came into the office, dressed much as he had been the previous day. He had already doffed his hat, and held it beside him as he paused before Beckett’s desk. He regarded his employer, his face blank, but his stance was definitely wary.

Cutler Beckett smiled slightly. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Sparrow. Please…take a seat.” He waved at a leather chair he’d had brought in from the library for this purpose, figuring that Sparrow couldn’t dirty the leather the way he might the damask upholstery.

Sparrow looked faintly surprised, but obediently sat down and waited expectantly. “I’ve been reviewing your logbook, Mr. Sparrow,” Beckett said, and produced it, still wrapped in the protective cloth. He slid it across the inlaid desk, back toward the first mate. “And I have been interviewing members of your crew.”

“Yes, sir.” Sparrow nodded.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that the EITC owes you rather a debt, Mr. Sparrow,” Beckett said. “You handled an uncomfortable, inherently dangerous situation with logic

and personal…charm…it seems. And thus saved the company a considerable sum of money.”

“Thank you, Mr. Beckett,” Sparrow said, obviously pleased and more than a little relieved.

Cutler Beckett leaned forward in his ebony chair. “Generally, when EITC employees save the company money, I award them a nice bonus. Say, ten pounds.”

Sparrow’s wariness subsided. His expression brightened visibly.

“However,” Beckett continued, “I suspect there are things you would much prefer to have rather than a monetary bonus, if I judge your character correctly.” Beckett paused and saw a spark leap in Sparrow’s dark eyes. “So… how would a promotion to captain suit you, as well as a vessel to command?”

Sparrow’s eyes widened, and then he smiled. The smile slowly widened to an ecstatic grin. “Thank you! That would suit me very well indeed, Mr. Beckett! Are you talking about the *Fair Wind*?”

“No, I’m thinking of something a little…larger. With more cargo capacity,” Beckett said. “The EITC has recently acquired a brand-new square-rigger named *Marlin*.” Quickly, from memory, Beckett summarized the ship’s vital statistics, her tons burthen, length, and rig. “Does that sound like something you would enjoy commanding, Captain Sparrow?”

Sparrow’s grin widened as he heard his new title spoken aloud for the first time. He nodded. “It certainly does, Mr. Beckett. Where is she? When can I take her out?”

“She’s here in Calabar, having refitting done. They should be done by the end of the week. Then we load up your cargo and you can set sail, Captain Sparrow.” Beckett was indulging his new “acquisition,” because it was so evident that hearing that those words made Sparrow want to leap up and down like a child at Christmastide.

But something wasn’t right. Beckett watched as Sparrow’s grin vanished, and the tense wariness reappeared. “Refitting, Mr. Beckett? I thought you said she was brand new.”

“She is. But her cargo area needs to be refitted to handle her projected cargo. The shipwrights tell me she’ll be able to haul nearly three hundred. With a cargo that size, you’re sure to have at least two hundred arrive in Barbados alive and ready for sale.”

Sparrow looked at him, clearly understanding now what Beckett meant. Then, slowly, he shook his head. “No.”

“No?” Beckett wasn’t used to that word from subordinates.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Beckett. I’m not your man. I’ll haul any cargo you assign me, even powder, dangerous as that can be. But I won’t transport slaves.” Jack Sparrow’s expression was carefully blank, and only the tightness of his jaw muscles betrayed any emotion. Still, Beckett sensed for the first time that this man had depths he hadn’t begun to glimpse.

Beckett was stunned, and allowed his reaction to show. He sat back in his expensive chair, and his gray eyes locked with Sparrow’s dark gaze for a long moment. “You surprise me, Mr. Sparrow,” he said, finally. “This is an extraordinary position for a man to take in these modern times. The slave trade isn’t a pleasant business, granted, but it is extremely lucrative. It’s very good business. One can’t afford these days to be finicky.”

“I know how profitable it is, Mr. Beckett,” Sparrow said. “But I’m not getting involved with it.”

“Can you tell me why, Mr. Sparrow?”

Jack Sparrow shrugged, and his eyes grew distant, as if he were experiencing some vivid memory. His mouth tightened. “Mr. Beckett, did you know you can smell a slaver coming for miles, if the wind is right, on the open sea?”

“Can you?”

“Yes. The stench is enough to put a sailor off his burgoo for a whole day. So let’s just say, Mr. Beckett, that I don’t like the way they smell, and leave it at that.”

“Very well,” Beckett said. He watched, enormously intrigued, as Sparrow stood up and retrieved his logbook. Who was this man, and what was his story? He was so different from most sailors. There was something wild about him, something…untamed. He watched as Sparrow walked across the room, and paused by the doorway.

“Thank you, Mr. Beckett, for the offer. I’ll just stay aboard *Fair Wind*, sir, as first mate, if that’s agreeable to you.”

This man is actually going to turn me down, Beckett realized, and then he thought, *I can’t let him go. He has too much potential. He might make an excellent operative for me in foreign ports, if I can gain his complicity. He’s smart and observant. If he proves trustworthy, he might be very valuable to me….*

“Just a moment,” Beckett said, making a sudden decision. “Come back, Sparrow. Perhaps we can make a different…arrangement.”

Slowly, Sparrow turned and walked back into the room. He paused before Beckett’s desk, but didn’t sit down when his employer waved at the leather chair. “What do you mean, Mr. Beckett?”

“I mean that for some reason, I’m inclined to indulge you, Sparrow.” Beckett shook his head. “I have another ship. It’s one I actually own. It’s an older ship. The shipwrights have told me that converting her hold to haul slaves would be expensive, and rather time-consuming, so I bought her for hauling other cargos.” Beckett looked up at Sparrow. “She’s called the *Wicked Wench*. Would you like to sail her for me, Captain Sparrow?”

Jack Sparrow smiled. “Yes, I would, sir. I’d be pleased to do that.”

“Very well, then, Captain. Why don’t we have a glass of claret to seal the bargain?”

He suspected that Sparrow would have preferred rum, the sailor’s drink of choice, but Beckett didn’t keep any. He considered it vulgar. Getting up, he went over to his cabinet and took out two glasses and a bottle, then poured. When he reached Sparrow to hand him his glass of wine, he found him studying the bookshelves. “Here you go,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Beckett.” Sparrow took the delicate glass carefully. He must have washed his hands, but they were stained with ground-in dirt. His nails were deplorable. Standing side by side, they both regarded the collection tables and bookshelves, while sipping their wine.

“I’ll fill out the paperwork to make the adjustments to your records, Captain. Your pay rate and such.” Beckett sipped his own wine, then added. “Feel free to take your friend Mr. Greene along with you, if you wish.”

Sparrow nodded. “I’d like that, Mr. Beckett. We’ve shipped out together for several voyages now. Robby is a good sailor and a good officer.” Almost absently, Sparrow reached out for the netsuke collection on the nearest shelf.

Beckett stepped smoothly between those questing fingers and his little jade valuables. “I’d rather you didn’t,” he said, politely. “Some of them are fragile.”

“Of course,” Sparrow said, dropping his hand to his side. “Sorry, Mr. Beckett.”

Searching for a way to change the subject, Beckett gestured at the bookshelves. “You read, Captain Sparrow? I mean, for pleasure?”

Sparrow sipped more claret before replying. “Yes I do, Mr. Beckett, when I can find books to take on voyages with me.”

“What kinds of things?”

Sparrow shrugged. “Poetry, history, biography…I like learning about the world.”

“Shakespeare?”

“Some of his plays, most of his poetry.”

“Ah, very good,” Beckett said, surprised again. “Tell me, what do you think of my collection? I keep my favorite books close to me, though, of course, I have the entire library next door.”

“Nice collection,” Sparrow said. “I’ve read only a few of them. My favorite would be this one,” he said, pointing. “I have a copy of it. Read it many times. As a lad, it was one of my favorites.”

Beckett followed his finger (those filthy fingernails!) and his eyes widened. “You’ve read Captain Ward’s book?”

“Aye, I have.” Sparrow was relaxing a bit, to let that “aye” slip, Beckett noted. Up till now, his word choice and accent had been perfect, nearly as flawless as Beckett’s own decidedly upper-class speech.

“One of my tutors gave it to me, when I was just a boy,” Beckett said. “He taught me Latin and Greek.”

“My fa—” Sparrow hesitated, then continued, smoothly, “that’s a coincidence, sir, because the man who taught me to sail eventually gave me his copy. I suppose you could say he was one of my tutors.”

Beckett sensed there was a story behind that hesitation, but he also knew that it wasn’t one he was going to hear. Sparrow’s expression was bland as he reached over and took down the volume in question. “I used to imagine going after the treasures mentioned in this book.”

“So did I,” Beckett said. “And here we are on the west coast of Africa.”

Sparrow caught his meaning immediately. There was nothing slow about this man. He quirked an eyebrow at his employer. “The treasure that lies at the center of the labyrinth of Zerzura,” he said. “Gold, jewels, and the Heart of Zerzura. All of it hidden on an illusion-shrouded island off the west coast of Africa.”

“Yes,” Beckett said. Reaching over, he took the volume from Sparrow, and placed it back in its slot. “Don’t think the

thought of mounting a search for Zerzura hasn't occurred to me, Captain. That was nearly the first thing I thought of, when I reached my new assignment."

"The only problem with legends like that," Sparrow pointed out, "is that most of them don't include treasure maps." His expression was perfectly serious, and it was a moment before Beckett realized that he was speaking with his tongue firmly in his cheek.

Cutler Beckett laughed. "You're right," he said. "That is jolly inconvenient of them, isn't it?"

"It is," Sparrow agreed, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement. Raising his wineglass, he finished the last sip of his claret and put the delicate wineglass down on the ebony desk. "Well, Mr. Beckett, thank you again for the promotion and the drink. I'll be off now, to find the *Wicked Wench* and take a look at her."

Beckett nodded, then he smiled and raised his own glass in a slight salute. "Here's to your first command, Captain." He finished his own claret. "You'll find your vessel at the EITC berthing docks. She's the largest square-rigger on the southern side."

In reply, Sparrow put his two hands together, chest-high, bobbing a slight bow. Beckett's eyes widened. "You've been to the Orient?"

"Aye. Singapore. And other places."

"I was stationed in Nippon for three years," Beckett said.

"I can tell," Sparrow said, blandly. "Very nice collection of netsuke."

Turning, he walked to the doorway. "Good-bye, Mr. Beckett."

"Good-bye, Captain Sparrow."

Three months after the *Wicked Wench* sailed out of Calabar Harbor, under command of her new captain, Cutler Beckett

was working in his home office late one evening. It was the rainy season, and the sound of the rain made a dreary counterpoint to the scratching of his quill. It also masked the sounds of footsteps, because the first indication he received that he had a visitor came when he heard a discreet knock at the door.

“Who’s there?” Beckett called.

“It’s Mercer, sir. I’ve located something I think you should see.” Mercer opened the door a crack and lowered his voice. “This Portugee deals in stolen goods. He has no idea what he has, except that he knows it’s gold.”

“Just a moment.” Beckett quickly cleared his desk of work, then covered it with a protective cloth before he spoke again. “Very well, Mr. Mercer. You may come in.”

The door opened, and Cutler Beckett’s operative appeared. Rain glistened on his tricorne, which he doffed as he walked in. Ian Mercer was a slender man, not very tall, with a pronounced Scottish accent and the coldest eyes Cutler Beckett had ever seen outside of a corpse. He was also quicker with a sword or dagger than anyone Beckett had ever employed before.

Mercer stepped into the room, then beckoned the man still standing in the hallway to follow. The man who warily entered the room was short and big-bellied, swarthy and wet. His olive skin shone greasily in the candlelight. He wore a loose-sleeved homespun shirt and trousers of native cloth, judging by the bright colors and geometric patterns. He was carrying a leather bag over his big shoulder, and his eyes rolled whitely as he took in his surroundings. It was clear to Beckett that he had never set foot inside a gentleman’s home before.

Beckett’s operative shepherded the man in, then closed and locked the door. “Bring them over here,” he said. “Mr. Beckett will need to see them before he’ll know whether he wants to buy. Place them on the desk.”

The man lifted his shoulders in a shrug, obviously not understanding.

Reluctantly, Mercer switched to another language and spoke haltingly. Portuguese, the EITC director guessed.

Beckett's eyebrows raised and his nostrils twitched disdainfully as his "visitor" drew near. Mercer spoke to the man in Portuguese, again, and his words had the ring of an order. The man nodded assent, then placed the wet leather satchel on the edge of the ebony desk, and withdrew a cloth-wrapped bundle.

As Beckett watched, he carefully unrolled several thicknesses of protective cloth padding, then arranged the objects from the bag in a row. Beckett took one look at them, then, his heart pounding, he slowly rose from his seat and looked more closely, unable to believe what he was seeing. Forcing himself to move with deliberation, Beckett straightened, and went over to his bookshelf. Extracting the J. Ward book, he returned to his desk and, still moving with deliberate calm, took out his magnifying glass. Still standing, he leaned closer, studying the artifacts closely, comparing their designs to the hand-tinted illustrations in Captain Ward's book.

A pectoral, an armband, an amulet, a ring, and a pair of earrings lay softly gleaming on the dirty cloth. All were made of gold, and all bore bright enamelwork. The earrings were the size of gold sovereigns, and in addition to their enameled borders, each bore a small design picked out in green stones. *Some kind of leaping creature, possibly a gazelle*, Beckett thought, leaning in to peer through the magnifying glass.

"Emeralds, or I miss my guess, sir," Mercer said, quietly.

"They certainly seem to be," Beckett replied, abstractedly. Slowly he turned over the objects, one by one, studying each minutely. The pectoral he compared closely with one of the hand-tinted designs in the book. After a moment, he realized he'd been holding his breath, and let it

out slowly. *That's a royal pectoral!* He exerted control, reminding himself to appear calm, but despite his efforts, when he finally spoke, his voice held an undercurrent of excitement that made Mercer glance at him sharply. "Mr. Mercer, ask him where he got them, if you please."

Mercer obeyed. The man went into a long speech, punctuated by many gestures. Finally, he ran down.

Mercer shook his head. "Near as I can tell, Mr. Beckett, he says he's had this bigger piece for a while." The operative pointed to the one Beckett had identified as a royal pectoral. "He won it about six months ago from a slaver named Duke Wren-John in a dice game. Wren-John said nothing about it where it came from."

"And the others?

"He's claiming that he bought these other items from the same man just a few months ago. Before the rainy season." The operative paused, then asked a question of the Portuguese man. Another, shorter, interchange followed. "He's repeating that the man's name is Duke Wren-John, but that this time Wren-John talked about the pieces, saying he'd taken these pieces off some slaves he captured. They were wearing them. He says the slaver had other things, too, other pieces of jewelry and amulets, but he didn't have the money to buy all of them."

Cutler Beckett picked up the armlet and examined it, turning it very slowly in his fingers, scanning the entire object minutely. He put it back down, then took a deep, careful breath. "I'll buy them. But only if he gives us every detail about that slaver who had them. Not just his name. I want to know where he lives, whom he deals with, where these slaves were captured, everything he remembers the slaver telling him. I must know every detail. Especially, I want to know what became of those captured slaves, the ones who were wearing these objects."

Mercer's eyebrow lifted. It was clear that the operative realized that something highly unusual was going on.

Beckett wasn’t about to offer any explanation, however. He cleared his throat. “Tell him what I said, please, Mr. Mercer.”

It took a long session of back and forth, with Mercer haltingly translating. At some point the Portuguese man discovered that his inquisitors understood Spanish, and they proceeded in that language. Beckett took out a quill and paper and took precise notes. At length, Mercer told his employer that he was confident that he had enough information to locate the slaver who’d captured the slaves wearing the jewelry.

Only then did Cutler Beckett hand Mercer the amount agreed upon for the jewelry. Mercer in turn handed the Portuguese dealer his money, then led him from the room.

Cutler Beckett stood there until they were gone, then locked the door after them. He returned to his desk, and sank down into his chair. There was no sound but the pounding of the rain.

Beckett sat looking down at the jewelry, scarcely able to believe his eyes. Putting out a finger, he touched the armlet, feeling its solidity. “Kushite,” he murmured softly. “There can be no doubt.” The style of the piece, the incised decoration—it was remarkably similar to the armlet illustrated in Captain Ward’s book. But this jewelry wasn’t ancient. Beckett was sure of it. It had been made recently.

That could mean only one thing. This jewelry didn’t come from some ancient tomb in the land that the Egyptians had called Kush. It wasn’t thousands of years old.

It must have come from Zerzura.

Beckett’s fingers caressed the cover of Captain Ward’s book, and he smiled, thinking and planning.

Zerzura, by all that is holy. Captain Ward, you were telling the truth, bless you. It’s real. It’s all real. Zerzura, the Shining City, where the treasure lies at the heart of the labyrinth. Kerma, the lost island. It’s real, by Jove. Finding Zerzura will bring me everything I’ve ever wanted. Power, wealth…I’ll have it all. The Heart, the source of ancient

power. The golden treasure. And don’t forget the people. Black gold, they call slaves. All of Kerma, lying there waiting to be discovered! And it will all be mine....

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Chapter Five
The Lost Princess

Amenirdis, lost princess of Zerzura, was dreaming of the day she lost her name, and herself.

She was curled on her woven mat in the building reserved for the female house slaves, her ugly gray shawl wrapped around her, despite the muggy heat of the rainy African night. The dream was so real, so detailed, it was as if she were reliving those awful moments, just as they had happened. She stirred in her sleep, her hands curling into fists, clutching folds of her shawl as the dream unfolded….

She was back on the seemingly endless savannah of the land their native guides had called Ethiopia, part of her small caravan, walking with her face toward the descending sun, full of silent despair. She had led a caravan of her people on what had proven to be a useless and heartbreaking pilgrimage to their ancient homeland of Kush, the country men now called Nubia. She'd been so sure that if she went to the ancient homeland, that the gods would help her find her missing father and brother!

The princess's father, Pharaoh Taharka, had left their hidden island five years ago, seeking a remedy to cure her little brother, Prince Aniba, who had died three months after the king's departure. Taharka had never returned. A year later, her fourteen-year-old brother, Prince Shabako, had vanished, leaving a note that he had gone to seek his missing father. He had not returned, either.

Amenirdis grieved for her missing brother every day, until one morning she had awakened with a vision of their ancient homeland as it was portrayed in their record scrolls.

There had been no contact between the Western exiles and those who had remained in Kush, no contact for more than three thousand years. Perhaps it was time to heal old wounds, to reunite with their distant cousins. Her mind filled with her vision; the princess became convinced that if she went to Apedemak's most ancient temple and prayed there, the god would grant her knowledge of her brother and father's fate. She felt certain Shabako still lived. Surely if he had died, she would have known. They had been close…so close.

And now her dreams lay broken. She walked across the seemingly endless savannah, ignoring the aching of her tired feet. At least the savannah was better than the Great Desert they had crossed to reach the Great River, the Nile. Amenirdis tried to tell herself that all was not lost. She had gambled with this mission, and she had lost, but at least now she was on her way home, and the desert was behind them. She would go home to the Shining City, to fair Zerzura, where her mother, Queen Tiyy, waited anxiously for her return.

Catching the toe of her sandal on a rock, the princess stumbled, and her eunuch bodyguard, Tarek, quickly steadied her. The princess flashed him a weary smile of thanks. He was so faithful, always at her side; with him she felt completely safe. Tarek was the tallest, broadest male in the party. Amenirdis was tall for a woman, but his massive form towered over her.

The princess sighed. They had all had such great hopes for this expedition, only to see them dashed. Their journey from the West Coast had taken two long, weary months. First they had ventured inland, and then the native guides they'd hired had taken them south, in order to avoid as much of the Great Desert as possible.

Finally, they'd traveled north, skirting the Nile, to reach the third cataract. They knew that their destination, the city of Kerma, lay just south of the third cataract. They'd been

filled with anticipation and joy as they walked those final few miles, excitedly waiting for their first glimpse of the legendary city of their forebears. Amenirdis had pictured the bustling city as it was depicted in their ancient scrolls: the massive *deffufas* built of mud-brick, towering like man-made, flat-topped mountains, the pharaoh's palace, the temples, the municipal buildings, the round dwelling places of the populace, and, on the outskirts, the massive circular mounds marking the burial sites of the pharaohs who had passed on to the next life—all the grandeur that was part of their ancient heritage. The high priest, old Piye, could scarcely contain his excitement. For the first time since their exodus nearly three thousand years ago, the descendants of Kerma were returning, eager for the sight of their Eastern brethren.

But instead of palaces, temples, and throngs of people, they had found nothing but a long-deserted ruin.

Amenirdis sighed again, realizing her pace had slowed, and thus, everyone had slowed to accommodate her. Determinedly, she lengthened and quickened her stride, and the group picked up the pace. Two of the warrior-priests preceded her, and the other two walked behind her. Her two maids flanked her. Behind the priests trudged the baggage slaves. The princess's personal contingent of guardsmen surrounded the party, their bows held ready, arrows nocked, swords loose in their sheaths. As they walked, their trained eyes scanned every clump of vegetation, every stand of trees or rock outcropping for possible enemies.

Amenirdis could smell the vegetation beneath their feet as they walked, and the pungent odor of sweat-soaked humanity. She'd wrapped a scarf around her head to protect her from the sun, but even with it across her forehead, droplets still collected, dripping down her face. Every time she moistened her lips, she tasted salt. The party had stopped to rest when the sun was overhead, at its strongest, but even now, with it mercifully low in the sky, she still felt

as though she were wrapped in a woolen cloak, lying before a roaring fire. All of them were sweating, not just the baggage slaves.

They had no warning. None.

One moment they were walking over the rich sward of the savannah, the next, a strange sound like a sharp crack of thunder split the air. One of her guardsmen went down like a sacrificial animal before the knife of a priest. He lay sprawled, silent, unmoving. Amenirdis stopped, staring, unable for a second to connect the two events—the sound, then the guard's death. Amenemhet, commander of the guards, shouted an order.

His men moved into defensive positions, lances and bows ready.

Another thunder-sound smote the air…another guard dropped.

"Down!" shouted the commander. "Everyone down!"

Amenirdis froze, unable to move. Tarek grabbed her and flung her to the ground. She gasped, her wind knocked out by the force of her landing. The eunuch rested his huge hand between her shoulder blades, holding her motionless, though after finally drawing breath, she regained her wits enough not to struggle. Cautiously, she raised her head a tiny bit, realizing that the entire group lay prone, the tall grasses waving with the disturbance caused by their bodies. *What just happened?* she wondered, dazedly. *Two men, dead—and no sign of a weapon! Are the gods angry with us? Did they send invisible lightning to strike us down?*

For a moment she wondered whether she should stand up, offer herself to the angry god, or goddess, and beg him or her to spare her people. She would explain that the responsibility for their journey to the original Kerma had been hers. If the gods were angry that the descendants of ancient Kerma had trodden on once-sacred ground, let them vent their fury on her, and her alone.

But that didn’t make sense, she realized a moment later. Her party had offered all the correct prayers, made the proper sacrifice, and in all ways been reverent, even though the once-mighty city was now nothing but dirt, sand, and rock, studded with pottery shards and ruins. The massive *deffufas*, the ancient temples, still rose as huge piles of mud-brick rubble above the plain, victims of erosion and wind. In places it had been possible for the eye to trace the outline of the city wall, or some of the larger buildings, but mostly it was only the littered ground that hinted that once humans had lived there. The enormous burial tumuli of the long-dead kings still showed as swellings above the ground, but unless one knew what they were, they were easy to overlook.

Time had reduced the capital city of Kerma, heart and soul of the empire of Kush, to rubble and memories—nothing more. There were no gods there to anger.

Besides, if there was power being used here, either by gods or humans, her bracelet would tell her. Amenirdis touched the wristlet, the sacred band bearing the stylized image of a lion picked out in green gems, stones that were slivers of the Heart of Zerzura itself. The bracelet assured her that whatever had caused the deaths of those guards, it had not been magical in origin.

So if the gods were not dealing death out of thin air, who was?

Lying on the savannah, Amenirdis cautiously parted the grasses with her hands, trying to peer through them. Her heart stopped, then raced like a panicked horse when she heard a human voice shouting something in a language she did not understand.

Men? Men have this power, to slay from a distance like gods?

Turning her head, she exchanged a look with Tarek. He stared at her, then pointed with his chin to her right, and whispered, “Crawl,” in a voice pitched for her ears alone.

For answer, she shook her head, her heavy golden earrings swinging against her dark cheeks, then drew her dagger. *I will not desert my people*, she thought fiercely. Tarek's expression darkened as he read her resolve, then he jerked his head emphatically, repeating the command. Again the princess shook her head. Something touched her ankle, and it was all she could do not to shriek and jump. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw the high priest, grizzled old Piye, frowning urgently at her. When her eyes met his, he nodded emphatically, and jerked his head to the right, mouthing, "Go."

"No," she mouthed back.

Piye squeezed her ankle again, then his finger moved, spelling out symbols in their language on her skin, one at a time. She squeezed her eyes shut, concentrating, trying to visualize the message.

"THE GOD COMMANDS."

Amenirdis blinked, then gave Piye a glance, and a reluctant nod. She began crawling through the tall savannah grass, heading to her right.

It was hard. Tarek came behind her, guiding her with light taps on the soles of her sandals to turn right or left. She did not dare raise herself to her hands and knees, because only when she lay flat was the grass high enough to hide her. The grass stems tickled and were alive with insect life. Dirt clung to her sweaty body, and the effort of pulling herself forward, sliding over the ground on her belly, soon left her drenched in sweat. She itched until she thought she would go mad, but could not stop. Her bruised body cried out for rest, but she knew the Tarek and the others were behind her, and they were looking to her to lead them, so she kept moving.

When she reached the outer perimeter of their group, she had to crawl between two of her guardsmen. They nodded respectfully at her, but did not move, and it was then that the princess realized that they intended to stay

behind, to cover her retreat. *No*, she thought. *They should be trying to escape, too!* But there was no way to give orders or to argue. All she could do was to keep inching forward, making as little stir in the grass as possible.

Any second she dreaded to hear that terrible thunder sound again, but it did not come.

The sun was very low now, turning the stems of some of the waving grasses to gold. Amenirdis kept crawling, wondering whether the whole party might be able to escape under cover of night.

Finally, after what seemed hours of sliding forward on her belly, something besides more stalks of grass entered her very narrow view. Rock thrust up before her. As she continued to crawl, it widened, visible through the stalks of grass like the wedge of a plow. Amenirdis dared to roll slightly onto her side, so she could gain some idea of how high the rocky extrusion was.

It was an outcrop of sandstone, a good-sized one. She could see the leaves of small trees waving in the faint breeze, some of them growing up from cracks in the rocks. There were also clumps of brush. It offered concealment, refuge.

We made it! she thought, feeling a surge of relief. *We can all hide among the rocks until the sun goes down, then we can try to get away from the men that are out there, these men who can kill from a distance.*

Her mind raced, planning her strategy for the remainder of the journey. They would travel only at night, hiding during the day. They should be able to retrace their path to the coast, if they were careful. Their boats would be waiting for them, because they were carefully hidden by illusion and spell-protected. They would—

Sound erupted behind them. Thunder cracks shattered the stillness. She heard war cries, shouts, then screams.

Tarek surged forward, bent almost double, and grabbed her up beneath one massive arm as he raced for the rocks.

A bare moment later she was flung into concealment behind a screen of bush and a large rock, with her back against another rock, this one the size of a small dwelling. Almost immediately two other bodies crowded into the recessed niche with her: Tarek and Piye, the high priest.

Amenirdis drew her dagger, expecting any moment to be hauled out of the little refuge, but seconds turned into minutes, and no one appeared.

The thunder cracks had ceased. She crouched with her two protectors, unable to see out, listening as hard as she could. Shouts in a language she did not know filled the air, mixed with wailing, screams, and moaning. Four more thunder cracks, and the screams stopped abruptly.

“Are we the only ones to escape?” Her voice was weak, barely more than a breath.

Tarek nodded grimly. “Yes, Highness. I believe so.” The eunuch’s eyes held fear, not for himself, she knew, but for her. “I believe our escape is only temporary. Sooner or later they will search this area, and they will find us.” He glanced up at the sky. “When night falls, it might be possible to climb these rocks and get away, but I hold little hope for that.”

The princess knew he spoke the truth. “We must pray,” she said, softly. “Piye, will you guide us in a prayer to Apedemak?”

“Highness,” the old priest said, “rather than praying right now, I feel we should do what we can to strengthen ourselves.” He held up a pack. Amenirdis recognized it. It was not large, and she had last seen it carried by Amanimalel, one of her maids. “I grabbed the strap to help her along, but she tripped and fell, and suddenly I was holding only the pack,” he explained, his dark eyes full of regret. “Perhaps I should have dropped it, but I was running so quickly I couldn’t summon the wit to do so.”

Quickly, he opened the little pack. There was a ceramic water container, stoppered and full. Piye held it out to Amenirdis. “Here, Highness.”

She drew back. “No,” she said. “I will drink only if we share equally.”

Each of them passed it around and took a few quick, grateful swallows. Even though the water was nearly as warm as bathwater, Amenirdis thought that no drink had ever tasted as good. Piye searched further, and pulled out a round of griddle bread, which they broke into pieces and shared. Even the two bites that were her share helped restore the princess’s energy.

The priest searched the rest of the contents, finding a wrinkled skirt, an old, patched tunic, some hair beads, a gray shawl, and a spare pair of sandals. All were equally worn.

The three of them regarded each other in dismay. “It was too much to hope for a weapon.” Tarek said, finally. “We still have our daggers.”

“Yes,” Piye said, abstractedly, glancing at the sky. “Not long till sunset.”

Smells of cooking, laughter, and conversation reached them. Evidently the captors and slayers were setting up camp. “How many do you think survived?” Amenirdis asked.

“No way to know,” Tarek said.

A woman screamed, then screamed again. It was a shriek of outrage and pain, and then a new voice echoed it. Amenirdis recognized those cries. “Amanimalel,” she whispered. “And Pennut. I know their voices.”

Piye exchanged a glance with Tarek. “Highness,” he said, urgently, “you are in grave danger, worse than Tarek and I. All they are likely to do is kill us. But you…”

Amenirdis knew what the old man was trying to say. “You need not be so delicate,” she said. “I am twenty years old, Holy One. I know what men do to captive women.”

The old man’s dark skin darkened even more as he blushed. The princess had to fight back the hysterical urge to laugh. Instinctively, she knew if she started, she wouldn’t

stop. Sternly, she ordered herself to stop trembling and show courage.

“Highness,” Piye said urgently, “I believe you must disguise yourself. If they realize you are of royal blood, they may target you all the more.”

“What should I do?”

“To begin with, give us your jewelry,” Tarek said. “Let them not find it on you. And put on your maid’s clothes. I will hide your own clothing down the crevice behind me. Perhaps they will not find it.”

She nodded, and the men politely dropped their faces onto their drawn up knees. It was not easy to pull on the worn skirt and tunic, and the battered old sandals without standing, but she was young and agile, and she managed. When she was finished changing her garments, she stripped off her matching lapis and gold armlets, her golden earrings, and the heavy necklace made up of three strings of lapis, gold, copper, white and pink coral, and emerald beads. The only jewelry she kept was Apedemak’s sacred wristlet.

Tarek, as promised, stuffed her discarded clothing and gold-beaded sandals down the crevice, then he and the priest concealed the jewelry in the pack.

Piye regarded her. “And now, Highness, you and I must work together to weave a spell. Your wristlet is a source of power, and that will help strengthen us. We need to disguise you, make you into someone who will not be perceived as a vessel to incite…”

“Lust,” Amenirdis finished briskly, when he trailed off. She straightened her shoulders. “Very well. I have no wish to face what my poor maids are undergoing. How shall we do this?”

“I believe we can create an illusion that will hold faithfully. You have an affinity with fabrics, woven things,” Piye said. The old priest picked up the gray shawl and shook it out, gazing at it thoughtfully. “This should do. We will

center our illusion on it. While you are wearing it, or even touching it, you will appear as we envision you in our spell."

"What shall we try for?" the princess asked.

The old man shook his head. "Something…off-putting. I fear this is not something I know much about. Standards for female beauty are not something I…I have not the experience to…" he floundered to a halt, shrugging helplessly.

"Give her a squint," Tarek said, suddenly, surprising both of them, miming crossed eyes with his fingers. "Thin, lank graying hair. Protruding, snaggled teeth. Some strategically placed warts…hairy ones. Wrinkled, blotchy skin. A bit of a hunch to her back, so she can't stand straight. Make her shorter, so everyone will look down on her. Make her thin up top, and fat below. That should do it."

Amenirdis, hearing all this, shuddered. "I'll be hideous," she said, faintly.

"Yes," Tarek said. "And that will be all to the good."

Another female shriek split the air. The three gazed at each other in the fading light. Amenirdis swallowed. "Let us begin."

Spreading the shawl between them, the priest and the princess centered themselves, then began their spell. Amenirdis held the fabric in her right hand, draped over her forearm so it lay against her bracelet. Raising her left hand, she began weaving patterns in the air. Piye raised the other end of the gray fabric with both hands and breathed upon it, lending her spell-weaving his strength.

As the spell began to build, the princess closed her eyes, concentrating, holding an image of herself within her mind. Then, slowly, feature by feature, she altered that image, doing all the things Tarek had suggested. Weaving the spell was as exhausting as doing manual labor in the fields beneath the full glare of the sun. Amenirdis had to fight fatigue. She made herself concentrate, forced her left hand to move as it wove the spell in the air, creating the

illusion. With the illusion formed, the power of the bracelet helped her transfer it into the fabric of the shawl. Her fingers gripped the shawl as she let the spell flow through her.

Piye's strength reached her, entered her, strengthening her power.

Her eyes were closed, so she did not see what caused Tarek to suddenly draw in his breath. She could not spare the time to look at the shawl, see the faint glow of magic that was flowing into it. But she knew it was there.

After what felt like hours, she finished with her image, seeing in her mind's eye the distorted, pitiful creature Tarek had described so vividly. Amenirdis gave the spell one final surge of power, then dropped both hands into her lap. Her head sagged forward as exhaustion swept over her like an ocean wave, dragging her down.

Did she sleep, or lose consciousness? Amenirdis couldn't be sure, but when she finally opened her eyes, it was to darkness. A quarter moon lit the sky, and as her eyes adjusted, she could see Piye and Tarek as dark blurs against the lighter color of the rocks. The spell had exhausted Piye as much as it had her; the old man sagged against the rock, every muscle and sinew gone limp.

Gathering the shawl into her hands, the princess turned to Tarek. "How do I look?" she asked, her voice rough with weariness. She felt as though she had moved a mountain with her bare hands.

Tarek opened his mouth, but he never got the chance to reply.

Sudden light shone into their little hiding place. They blinked at the brightness, drawing back. A voice called out words they did not know, as the man holding the torch stepped forward. *I must transform my bracelet*, the princess thought. She shrank back, clutching the gray shawl around her, hiding the golden wristlet beneath a fold of the fabric. Quickly, she touched it, willing it to transform. A moment

later, when she pulled her arm out from beneath the shawl, Apedemak's talisman appeared to be naught but a scrap of rough-woven fabric encircling her wrist. She stared up as a dark shape loomed menacingly over her, feeling fear twist inside her. Had the illusion worked?

Rough hands seized her.

Amenirdis tried to pull away from those grasping fingers, and as she did so, she gasped sharply and awoke. She lay there for a moment, her heart hammering, fighting to breathe. *It was just a dream*, she thought. *You dreamed about when you were captured. It was very real, but it's in the past. Calm down….*

She, Tarek, and Piye had been captured by slavers on that terrible day. She'd soon learned that bands of slavers roamed the interior of the continent, searching for prey. They could be either black men or white men, but they were alike; they all carried whips and iron rods, either short or long, that they called "muskets" or "pistols." These weapons were the things that had caused the thunder-crack noises, these deadly guns that could slay from a distance. The white men had brought these weapons to Africa, but black men had been quick to adopt them and use them to deal death. White or black, slavers cared only for money; she had learned that, too.

The princess's racing heartbeat slowed, as the nightmare lost its grip on her. She heard rain spattering on the roof. The rainy season had started a bit early this year. Opening her eyes, she could just make out the outlines of her surroundings—the line of pallets on the dirt floor, each holding a sleeping woman. The women's slave dormitory; yes, she was certainly safe.

Her lips curved in a mirthless grin. Safe from capture, at least. Nobody needed to capture her, because she had already been captured. She was here, on this big farm

outside of Calabar, and she was no longer a princess—instead, she was a slave. She had lost everything, even her name. No longer did she bear the proud name of a forbear who had been queen of Kush. She'd abandoned her real name, lest someone recognize it and ask about her origin.

These days, she was known as Ayisha.

It had been five months since Ayisha and the remnants of the Zerzuran caravan had been marched back to Calabar, tethered to one another like beasts of burden by a wooden and leather harness called a coffle.

By the time they'd arrived in Calabar, where they had been sold, their band had been reduced to less than half of the Zerzurans who had survived the initial attack. Ayisha had watched, anguished, as her maids, then two priests, then half the remaining guardsmen had perished during that journey from heat, wounds, starvation, or sickness. As the days went by, she wondered that she had not died herself… and she also found herself envying those who did.

In Calabar, most of the remaining survivors had been sold to slavers who had promptly loaded their new acquisitions into the holds of ships and sailed west. Only Piye, Tarek, and Ayisha were purchased by owners who kept them on African soil.

She had no idea where Piye's owner had taken him, but she knew where Tarek was. Both of them had been purchased by the same man, an Englishman named Dalton. Master Dalton owned a farm outside Calabar, where he grew food to supply the slave ships. Tarek toiled all day in the fields, growing yams, millet, sorghum, and rice. And she, Ayisha, was the farm's weaver and seamstress. She spent her days in the weaving and sewing room, making fabric and sewing clothing. At first she had made only simple homespun garments for the field hands, but as her expertise became evident, she was trusted to sew clothing for first the house slaves, then her English master and mistress and their children.

These days, even Mistress’s wealthy friends occasionally brought her bolts of beautiful fabrics and she created dresses for them, modeled on drawings they showed her from books and sketches. Ayisha had a small but growing cache of coins these women had given her as tips, for doing good work. “She’s so ugly one can hardly stand to look at her,” one woman had remarked, as her friend modeled her new afternoon gown, “but I swan, the creature can sew a beautiful gown!”

Ayisha had not, of course, betrayed that she had understood the English. On the march to Calabar, she’d picked up a working knowledge of Yoruba, the language of the local tribes who now controlled the slave-hunting ventures. And once she’d reached the farm, she’d learned the common language spoken by the slaves, which was called pidgin. It was a mixture of several native tongues, with some foreign words thrown in for good measure. But except for obeying commands given her in pidgin, and replying in monosyllables, she was careful to keep her mouth shut. She didn’t want to talk to anyone.

Once she’d reached the farm, where her new master, Roger Dalton, his wife, Mistress Dalton, their children, many of the house servants, and the overseers spoke English, she’d begun learning that language. She had always been good with languages. It was part of her, just as she was good with sewing, weaving, anything to do with fabric. It was all part of the gift the gods had given her at birth, just as her ability to work magic was. She’d had the most ability of anyone in her family, far more than her father or brother.

For all the good it did her. This far from the Heart of Zerzura, her power was limited. She could do a few things, especially where fabrics were concerned, but she was bitterly aware that she lacked the power to escape to freedom.

At least she still had her small tie to the Heart, and Zerzura. No one had given the woven scrap she wore

around her wrist even a glance. It was barely more than a rag, with a faint design picked out by a few embroidered threads.

Ayisha turned over on her pallet, pulling the shawl up over her shoulder. She never let it out of her grasp, not even for a moment. All that stood between her and abuse from the male world was the illusion of her ugliness, so she clung to it fiercely.

She lay there, closing her eyes, seeking sleep, but it eluded her. Instead she found herself envisioning her mother's face. By now her mother had probably given her up for dead. And, in a way, her daughter Amenirdis, Princess of Zerzura, *was* dead.

Tears filled her eyes, but Ayisha fiercely blinked them back. She had not cried since that terrible march across Africa, yoked into a coffle with her sick and, at times, dying countrymen. Crying solved nothing. What she had to do was figure out some way to escape.

She rolled over again, onto her back, and stared up into the darkness. Escape meant a ship. They couldn't walk across water.

If more and more of the white women came to her, bringing her pictures of dresses, bringing her fabrics she'd never encountered before, but were beautiful beyond belief—silks, satins, velvets—and she sewed well for them, they would continue to give her coins. Every day her knowledge of English grew. When she was sure she was entirely alone, and the sound of her loom clacking masked any noise she made, Ayisha practiced speaking English, whispering, first words, then sentences. She knew that being able to communicate would be essential to gaining passage aboard a ship.

Even now, Mistress Dalton was beginning to trust her, allowing her to walk to town sometimes on little errands, especially those connected with her sewing. During these trips, Ayisha confined herself to pointing, gestures, and a

few words of pidgin. She didn't want anyone to know she could speak well. She always kept her ears open for any word of Piye, but so far she had not been able to discover where he had been taken.

Every time she walked past the docks, Aiyisha gazed hungrily at the ships, and she planned. She would save her coins. And when she calculated that she had enough of them, she would buy food and supplies for their journey. Then she and Tarek would leave the farm in the dead of night, and stow away aboard a westbound vessel. Not a slave ship, though. Spell-weaving required concentration, and she would not be able to concentrate in the presence of so many doomed people—her own people, people of Africa, people with dark skins.

After the ship set sail, the closer it came to the island of Kerma, the stronger her power would become. If she were within a day's sail of her homeland, Ayisha was confident she could weave a spell that would cause the entire crew to fall into deep sleep. Then she and Tarek would lower a boat and take their chances on the open sea. If Apedemak and the other gods favored her, there would be no storms to swamp their boat, and they would reach their illusion-cloaked homeland. The mists shrouding the island would part for her, because that was part of her bracelet's power.

And then…then they would be home. Home! The thought of it made tears prickle again.

She would never know the fate of her father, or her brother, but at least she would be there to comfort her mother. Amenirdis had no desire to rule Kerma, but if she was the only heir left, she would do her duty, and become queen upon her mother's death.

The first thing she would do when she was queen, she vowed, lying sleepless in the darkness, listening to the sound of the rain spattering on the roof and the breathing of her fellow slave women, would be to free Kerma's slaves.

* * *

Ayisha was able to implement her plans over the next few months. Two months into the rainy season, she could speak entire sentences in English. When she sewed in the main house, her sewing room was next door to the schoolroom. She listened to the children as they did their lessons and read aloud. Sometimes she dared to mouth what they were saying, the sound she made barely above a breath. On days when their lessons ended before her sewing project did, she would hurry to finish her work, then lay down the finished project and softly tiptoe next door to the schoolroom. Once there, she listened for approaching footsteps while she studied the pictures on the wall. Once or twice she dared to open the books and gaze at the pictures they held.

Best of all, she liked the globe that stood on the schoolmaster's desk. It fascinated her. If this was a true depiction of the world, then Apedemak's priests were correct; the world was round, and it circled the sun.

Ayisha would spin the tan globe slowly, trailing her fingers over its surface. After much study, she identified Africa, because she was able to trace the path of the Nile. She even located the Third Cataract, and knew that the ancient site of ruined, deserted Kerma lay just south of it.

From there, tracing her finger west, and then out onto the sea, she found islands not far west of the northern bulge of West Africa. There were two groups of them. And, she knew, between those clusters of known islands lay her illusion-cloaked homeland.

One day, after she had finished weaving a beautiful blanket for a newborn on its presentation day, she sat sewing in the big house, her needle flashing silver in the sunlight streaming through the west-facing window. Glancing up at the sound of footsteps, she saw Master Dalton, accompanied by a short, slight man wearing a black hat, coat, and black gloves. For the briefest second, their gazes touched.

Ayisha stabbed herself with her needle. Quickly, before her blood could touch the silk, she pulled her finger away and sucked it hastily, keeping her eyes down. Despite the heat, she felt chilled to the bone from the touch of the newcomer's eyes. She had seen that look in a man's eyes before, during their march to Calabar. The head slaver was a black man who insisted on being called "Duke" to his face, though she'd learned that his real name was Ancona Wren-John. Duke had had eyes like that.

She was aware, peripherally, of the man glancing at Master Dalton incredulously. "I see you were not exaggerating when you called her ugly, sir. A face to curdle fresh milk, Master Dalton." His accent was strange, unlike any Ayisha had heard before, and she had some trouble understanding him. She listened intently as she began sewing again.

"'Tis true, Ayisha's looks will never bring her the attention of a man," Master Dalton said. "But she's a good worker. Weaves a fine cloth, sews a fine seam. Gives no trouble."

"And you say you bought her from Ancona Wren-John, from the coffle he brought in the last of January? The same coffle with the old holy man and the big eunuch?"

"That was the one," Master said. "I always go among the slaves, and speak to those I consider buying. I can make myself understood in Yoruba. M'wife told me she needed a weaver and a seamstress, and I asked the women if any of them could weave or sew. This one raised her hand. I took her across the street before the sale, to the house of a friend, and showed her a loom, told her to weave. And weave she could. So I bought her. Because of her looks, she came cheap. It was a pleasant surprise to discover she could also sew."

"She speaks no English?"

"No. Only a few words of Yoruba and of course a bit of the pidgin the slaves here in Calabar use. Yes, no, come

here, that kind of thing. I don't think she's actually lack-witted. But my wife has to speak to her very simply. At first I wondered if she was mute, but she's not. But she hardly ever speaks."

"My employer is in need of a good weaver and seamstress for his household," the newcomer said. "How much?"

Master Dalton shook his head. "I don't want to sell Ayisha. She's too good at her craft."

Hearing this, it was all Ayisha could do not to visibly sag in relief. The man with the black gloves frightened her. She didn't know why, but she was convinced that whatever he wanted her for, it wasn't her ability as a seamstress or weaver.

She stitched faster, and moments later, heard them leave.

That night, she dreamed of the day that Pennut had been unable to rise from the ground. Ayisha, weakened herself, had been trying to help her stand, when "Duke" had come striding over. With a swift shove, he'd thrust the princess away from her maid, and then she'd heard the thunder-crack of his pistol. Pennut had sagged to the ground, a hole between her wide-open eyes. Ayisha had had this dream before. In the dream, as she had done in life, she had raised her gaze to the slaver, incredulous that he could wipe out a human life as though Pennut had been nothing more than a beast.

But this time, when she looked up at Ancona, his face was the face of the visitor with the black gloves. Ayisha awoke, sweating and trembling. She was so terrified of falling asleep and dreaming again of him that she lay there, pinching the inside of her elbow until dawn brightened the eastern sky, and it was time to rise and begin work.

Not long before noon, Mistress Dalton came to the weaving room in the slave quarters to find her. Two men accompanied the Englishwoman. Ayisha glanced at them

covertly. One of them was the man with the black gloves. She had to exert every bit of control not to let her fear show.

The other man was different. She realized quickly that he was a wealthy English gentleman. One glance at the quality of his clothing, the fabric, the tailoring, told her that. He was also short.

Ayisha puzzled over his age. His features were smooth, unlined, but his hair was as white as milk, and worn in two large curls on either side of his face.

As they stood there, staring at her, Ayisha continued to weave, her loom clacking rhythmically. She didn't make eye contact with the newcomers, but watched them covertly.

Mistress indicated Ayisha, then bobbed a curtsey as she addressed her guests. "Here she is, sir. The weaver you asked to see. Her name is Ayisha." Raising her voice, she called, "Ayisha!"

Ayisha stopped weaving and looked up, unsure whether to rise. "Mistress?" she asked, speaking pidgin.

"Master has sold you, Ayisha," her mistress said. "I'm sorry to see you go, but it can't be helped. Go and gather your things, then come back here immediately. Don't dawdle."

Ayisha rose, feeling her heart leap with fear. She bobbed a quick curtsey, nodding.

Quickly, she headed for the door. *What should I do? I want to run, but what good would that do? I'd be caught before I'd gone a mile. The trackers have dogs....*

As she neared the doorway, head down, Mistress Dalton and the black-gloved man stepped back so she could leave. But the white-haired man suddenly moved, stepping in front of her, barring her exit.

"Hallo, Ayisha," he said, in English. "My name is Cutler Beckett, and I am your new master. I can't wait till we can have a nice, long talk."

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Chapter Six
The Wicked Wench

Jack Sparrow had never thought it would happen to him. All his life, he'd heard people speak of love—mostly men, of course, since he'd spent the majority of his life at sea, and there were few women who chose that life. Life on the sea was a male-dominated occupation, whether the sailors were pirates or seamen aboard a merchant ship or the crew of a naval vessel. There were the rare—and refreshing—exceptions, of course, such as Esmeralda, lovely Esmeralda….

Men were self-conscious about referring to love. They were often given to enthused bragging regarding their carnal adventures and conquests, but when they referred to love, it was usually in a hushed whisper, or a mumble. Sometimes an awed murmur, if the poor chap was embarrassingly besotted.

Jack wanted to shout his adoration aloud—and he would have, too, if he hadn't had a certain dignity to maintain. But ever since that day when he'd seen her, he'd thought of her with…love. No other word fit.

She was lovely, yes, of course. But there was more to it than that. She moved with authority, as well as beauty. There was a wildness, a sense of freedom and strength about her that captivated his heart, his soul. He wanted her for his own. When he'd finally gotten close to her, could touch her, she'd responded to his touch, he fancied, the way she had never responded to another man's.

Love, yes; there was no other word for the way he felt about her. At night he even dreamed about her, about how

it felt to guide her as she moved, feeling her respond to his orders. Her intoxicating scent—tar and salt and honest sweat. The sounds she made—the wind filling her ivory sails, the creak of her sheets, the slap of the waves against her red-gold bow as she clove the sea. She was beautiful, a work of art with graceful, gilded lilies and scrollwork emblazoned on her bow and stern, and gilded railings on her gunwales. A golden dream of a vessel…and she was all his to command. The *Wicked Wench* was her name, and Jack Sparrow, at long last, knew what it was to be in love.

The first time he'd seen her, she'd been tied up at the EITC dock in Calabar, looking somewhat forlorn. It was plain she hadn't been taken out for the last few months, since Cutler Beckett had acquired her. She was a ship that needed maintenance. First and foremost, she was crying out for a good careening. And once her bottom was clean, her decks needed scrubbing; her railings and trim needed painting. Her sails needed patching, and many of her lines needed replacement or splicing.

But Jack had seen beyond her down-at-heels appearance, seen the glory and grandeur of a full-rigged ship that could prove both fast and maneuverable. This "wench" had felt a lot of ocean slide beneath her keel, but she was sound; he could feel it in his bones. She most resembled a Dutch East Indiaman. Typical of merchant vessels, she was woefully under-gunned: only six big guns on both the port and starboard sides of her main deck, then two smaller guns, six-pounders, on her weather deck, and, finally, three small swivel guns topside, one fore and two on her quarterdeck.

The *Wench*'s main deck guns were heavy ones, twelve-pounders. Jack thought about what it would be like to hear the roar of those big twelve-pounders loosed in a broadside against an opponent, and shivered with excited anticipation—before he sternly reminded himself that merchant

captains counted themselves blessed if they never had to fire their guns.

Jack longed for more armament for his new love, even though he knew he'd have trouble finding and training enough crew to man even as many guns as she now boasted on her main deck. Arming merchant ships was a tradeoff—guns, powder, and supplies took up space belowdecks that could be used for valuable—and profitable—cargo. Still, remembering his former associates at Shipwreck Cove, Jack immediately resolved to speak to Cutler Beckett about allowing him to install two additional twelve-pounders. That still wouldn't be enough weaponry to make any determined pirate think twice, but it was enough to dissuade smaller, more lightly armed and crewed vessels.

The day he first saw her, Jack stood there, spellbound, studying her every curve, every line, grinning like a besotted suitor. He couldn't help the first thought that sprang to his mind: *If I could just find enough men to crew her properly, what a pirate ship she'd make! If she were properly armed, and crewed, this ship could square off with Esmeralda's Blackwall frigate. Morgan himself never had such a ship.*

Sternly, Jack Sparrow repressed that thought. He was an honest merchant captain, and he'd best never forget it.

As Jack had stood there, gazing at HIS ship, he'd heard a step beside him and turned to find Robby Greene at his elbow. "Jack!" the younger man exclaimed. "I've been looking all over for you. Finally had to ask that nasty codfish of a portmaster, Blount, whether he'd seen you. He told me you were down here, staring at this ship, and had been for at least an hour. What's going on?"

Had it been that long? Jack blinked. He'd been so ensorcelled by the sight of his new vessel, making plans for getting her shipshape, that time had simply evaporated. He smiled at his friend and gestured at the ship. "What do you think of her?"

Robby stared at the *Wicked Wench* for a moment, then shrugged. “She’d be perfect if we were still on the account and we had enough guns, powder, and crew to sail her properly. Why?”

Jack chuckled at hearing his own initial assessment echoed so precisely. “She’s *mine*, Robby. Mr. Beckett made me her captain. We’ll be taking her out in a couple weeks, with a load of cargo.” He glanced back at the ship, straining against her tethering ropes like a spirited horse that wanted to run free. “How does it feel to be first mate of the *Wicked Wench*?”

A smile crept across Robby Greene’s tanned features. “First mate? Me?”

“Who better?” Jack said.

Robby laughed, then quickly sobered. “We’ll have to put together a crew.”

“She has some crew still in port,” Jack said. “Many of them found other berths and shipped out, but the office records indicate that there are perhaps twenty of them still here in Calabar. I’ll give you the list, and you can start rounding them up. Plus any hands you can scrounge up.” He glanced up the hill at the town of Calabar. “Not the best spot to find able-bodied seamen, I fear,” he added, wryly.

“Able-bodied?” Robby echoed. “Jack, we’ll be lucky if we can find ordinary seamen!”

“Her bottom’s a mess,” Jack rubbed his chin, meditatively. “She’s nothing but barnacles and muck below her waterline. Mr. Beckett gave me a free hand and some funds I’m to use to get her shipshape. I’m figuring two weeks till she’s ready to sail.”

Robby nodded. “Two weeks, aye. I’ll do my best to round up the crew we’ll need…Cap’n.”

Jack grinned. “Doesn’t that sound beautiful? Captain Jack Sparrow. Nice ring to it, eh?”

“Very nice indeed, Jack. Or are you so eager to hear it that I have to call you ‘captain’ even when we’re alone?”

Jack laughed out loud. “Indulge me for a few days, Robby, me lad. It’s been a long time coming.”

“Aye, it has. And you deserve it, Cap’n.”

Jack sighed happily. “I suppose I’ll get used to it with time, Robby, but at the moment, hearing it is better than a swig of rum, I swear.” He fell silent, regarding the ship, then his gaze shifted upward. “I’m thinking we should rake her masts back a bit to get more speed out of her.”

Robby nodded. “Three degrees?”

“Five.” Jack’s eyes lit up. “She’ll cut quite a figure, eh, mate?”

Robby nodded. “The masts look to be in good shape. We’ll need to go over all her canvas.”

“First, though, we’ve got to get her hull shipshape. We’ll take her up one of the Calabar’s tributaries half a mile, and careen her on one of those nice sandy banks.”

Robby swallowed. “The ones with all the crocodiles?”

“Aye,” said Jack. He waved a hand airily. “The crocs won’t be any problem. One blast from a swivel gun will send those scaly blighters slithering back into the river.” He rubbed his hands with anticipation at the thought of firing one of the guns. He was actually sober, but he felt as if he’d had a few quick jolts of rum. He couldn’t stop smiling.

Robby laughed and threw up his hands. “All right. You win. We’ll scrub her hull as clean as a girl baby’s bum on her Christening day.”

“First we clean her, then we replace any worn planking,” Jack said, totting off items on his black-rimmed fingers. “Then we’ll need to pay the bottom to protect against weed and worm. For that we’ll need fat and soap. And then we tallow her. And, if Mr. Beckett will spring for it, perhaps we’ll sheath her, too.”

“What about coating her with black stuff ?”

“That’s the last step. We’re not in Bristol or Liverpool. We’re more likely to be able to get white stuff,” Jack said. “We’ll need at least a barrel per side. I know how to mix it.”

“No wonder the worms won’t eat it,” Robby made a face. “All of that protectant stinks to high heaven.”

“Train oil, pine rosin, and *brimstone*, mate,” Jack said, with satisfaction. “It should!”

The two stood there, gazing happily at their new acquisition, discussing the *Wicked Wench*’s proposed toilette.

The next two weeks were busy ones. Jack, who could work like a demon when he was motivated, was up every day before dawn, overseeing the cleaning and refitting of his new vessel.

Robby, when he wasn’t helping with the work on the ship, was rounding up hands and sending them to help with the work. One day he rowed up to the ship with a windfall: three able-bodied seamen and two ordinary seamen. Jack, stripped to the waist in the heat, with a bandanna tied around his head to soak up the sweat, was standing on the canted starboard hull, overseeing the crew that was crawling around with brushes and scrapers, spreading the “white stuff ” preservative on the newly cleaned planking. When he saw the new arrivals, he leaped down to the ground and strode over to meet them as they pulled the boat up onto the sandbank.

After Robby made introductions, Jack interviewed the three able-bodied seamen briefly, nodded in satisfaction at their qualifications, then ordered them to join the crew members that were working on the hull.

As Robby escorted the new crew away, Jack turned his attention to the two remaining candidates. The ordinary seamen were a tall, gangly Frenchmen, Etienne de Ver, and a short, burly Englishman, Lucius Featherstone, both of them in their mid-twenties. The Frenchman was black-haired and sallow, the Englishman fair-haired and ruddy.

“I’m Captain Jack Sparrow, lads,” Jack said, though, in truth, both sailors were probably near his own age. Something about the way both of them were standing,

carefully not looking at each other, alerted him. He gestured from one to the other. “You two know each other?”

“*Oui*, Captain,” the Frenchman said, giving a military salute. Jack’s eyes widened with surprise.

Featherstone, not to be outdone, snapped to attention and saluted with even greater vigor. “Aye, sir, we do!”

“You were in the navy?” Jack was taken aback, thinking this didn’t bode well. If they’d been navy men, they both must have been cashiered. The navies of most countries were so short-staffed that they often had to resort to shanghaiing hands to serve. And, obviously, these two couldn’t have served in the *same* navy.

“No, *mon capitaine*,” de Ver said. “I was a soldier. Infantry.”

“And you?” Jack turned to Featherstone.

“Infantryman, Cap’n Sparrow. But the war, it ended almost three years ago, sir.”

Ah…the situation was now explained. They’d been paid off and mustered out honorably, one hoped.

“I see. How long have you been going to sea?” Jack asked Featherstone.

“I tried working as a farmhand for a year, Cap’n, but the crops failed in the drought,” the man said. “So then I signed aboard a merchant vessel, the *Molly Dover*. We went all the way to China, Cap’n. But while we were on our way back to Liverpool, the poor *Molly*, she hit a rock off the coast here, and we had to abandon ship in a storm. I need a new berth.”

“And you?” Jack regarded de Ver.

“I, too, was on the *Molly Dover*, Captain Sparrow,” the man answered.

A voyage from England to China…yes, that could easily take a year or more, depending on the number of ports of call.

“I see. So you were both soldiers. Who did you fight?” Jack asked, trying to remember what he’d heard about the most recent conflicts England and France had been engaged

in. There were always wars going on somewhere in Europe, and land battles had little relevance to men who lived on the sea.

“The British, *mon capitaine*,” de Ver replied.

“We fought the French, Cap’n Sparrow,” Featherstone said, almost at the same moment. “Kicked their frog-gulping arses, we did,” he added, with relish.

The former opponents exchanged sideways glances that were anything but amiable.

“I see,” Jack murmured, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “Well, if I permit you to join the ship’s company, are you prepared to be faithful hands before the mast?”

“Aye, *mon capitaine*!”

“Aye, Cap’n Sparrow!”

“Aboard the *Wicked Wench*, you’ll be comrades. Can you remember that?” Jack barked, letting an edge enter his voice.

“Oh, aye sir!” Featherstone said.

“*Oui, mon capitaine*,” de Ver said, then added, “Aye, sir,” in his strongly accented English for good measure.

“Very well,” Jack said, gruffly, eyeing the pair. Featherstone and de Ver seemed earnest, if not overly bright. “What ports of call on your voyage to China, Mr. de Ver?”

Etienne de Ver scratched his head thoughtfully beneath his battered cap. “Marseilles, *mon capitaine*,” he said. “Where the best ships, the ships built by Frenchmen, they are docking! Also, Lisbon, Gibraltar, Algol here in Afrique, then around the Cape of Good Hope to Shanghai. With stops for provisioning, *naturellement*.”

Featherstone made a derisive noise. “Don’t be payin’ any attention to that frog-eater, Cap’n Sparrow, sir,” he said. “He knows the best ships are made by Blackwall, and set sail from English ports. He’s just been out in the sun too long.” The short man tapped his forehead, where his sandy hair was thinning even at his age. “The sun and eating all

them unnatural vermin, them snails and frogs—turns a man's brain to porridge, it does."

The black-haired Frenchmen drew himself up indignantly. "*Zut*!" he snapped. "Captain Sparrow is obviously a man of the sea, a man who has sailed the world. *He* knows who builds the best ships!"

Jack cleared his throat significantly, and both sailors fell silent. "I see," he said, after a long pause. For a moment, he considered ordering both of them back into the canoe. But the *Wench* was still very short of hands, and he couldn't afford to be too choosy. Both Featherstone and de Ver were well muscled and appeared healthy. He'd keep an eye on them, and he'd tell Robby to do the same.

"Captain…" began Featherstone hesitantly.

"Yes, Featherstone?"

"Sir, beggin' your pardon, but…" Featherstone gulped and then plunged ahead, "I discovered I like life on the sea. The food ain't great, true enough, and it's hard work, but hard work never killed anyone, eh?"

Jack gestured for him to continue, and get to the point. "Yes?"

"Sir!" Featherstone straightened his shoulders. "Cap'n, I'd like the chance to qualify as an able-bodied seaman! I've already got a year in. Just wanted to say, sir."

"Able-bodied seamen" had to be able to "hand, reef, and steer," which translated to climbing rigging properly (which meant putting their hands and feet in the proper places), handle sails, raising or reefing them, as well as steering the ship in all types of weather, correctly following a course heading. They also had to be able to splice lines, repair equipment, and tie all of the knots used by sailors correctly. It was no surprise to discover that Featherstone wanted to raise his status to that of able-bodied seaman, because, traditionally, they made about twenty-five percent more in pay.

“I see,” Jack said. “Well then, look sharp during the next six months or so, because you never know when I’ll decide to test you, Featherstone.”

Featherstone was clearly pleased. He glanced quickly sideways at de Ver, smiling triumphantly. The lanky Frenchman stirred. “Captain Sparrow,” he said, clearly trying to make his English as proper as he could, “I, too, wish to be made able-bodied seaman.”

“Very well,” said Jack. “The same goes for you, then. Now, both you lads report to First Mate Greene. He’ll assign you to tasks.”

“Aye, Captain!” Featherstone saluted again.

“*Oui, mon capitaine*!” de Ver said, doing likewise.

Jack cleared his throat again, significantly. “Ahem. Mates, this isn’t a naval vessel. No need for all that saluting.” He waved a finger at the duo. “But the discipline I expect is no less,” he added, sternly. “Now off with you.”

As they moved away, he heard their voices drift back. “Just watch me make able seaman ahead of you,” Featherstone proclaimed.

“*Non*,” came de Ver’s retort. “It is I who will attain it before you!”

“Not a chance, frog! See, it takes *brains* to make able seaman. And courage!”

“Ze Englishman never lived who had either! Your countrymen ran like chickens before *Guillaume le Conquérant*!”

“Oho, but our Henry the Fifth, he crossed the channel and kicked your arses on your own soil! English longbowmen made pincushions out of them Frenchy knights!”

Jack rolled his eyes, sighing heavily as the pair moved out of earshot, still bickering.

Later that same afternoon, he examined the first shipment of provisions that had been delivered that day by the EITC portmaster, Benjamin Blount. Experience had

taught him to always check the quality of the casks of salt beef and pork and the barrels of ship's biscuit and flour.

Jack was understandably disturbed to discover that, below a top layer of good meat, more than half of the remaining contents seemed to have been so poorly cured that it was beginning to smell, and he could see maggots feasting. Disgusted, Jack began examining everything that Blount had sent to provision his vessel, and found that the improperly cured meat was but the beginning of his troubles. Below the first two inches of good flour, the flour barrel was as full of weevils as it was flour. It was the same for the ship's biscuit. Every sailor expected to encounter weevils during the course of a voyage. Inevitably the vermin hatched out in flour or ship's biscuit within a month or two after being stored in a cargo hold. But to start out the journey infested with them—!

His mouth set in a grim line, Jack ordered all the stores placed back into the boats, and selected crews to man them. Grimly he pulled his shirt and waistcoat back on, gathered up his coat and hat, and stepped into the lead longboat for the trip back to the harbor.

When he reached it, he ordered his men to load the spoiled provisions into a wagon and drive them to Portmaster Benjamin Blount's office. Then he set off, threading his way quickly through the scurrying throngs on the streets of Calabar until he reached the building that housed Blount's office.

Opening the door, he found the room deserted, except for a young clerk sitting at a desk, his pen scratching vigorously as he transcribed columns of numbers into account books.

"Captain Jack Sparrow," Jack announced. "I need to see Mr. Blount. Is he here?"

The clerk shook his head. "No, Captain. Mr. Blount said he was heading over to the EITC provisions warehouse."

Jack smiled. It was not a pleasant expression. “What a coincidence. That’s where I’m heading, too.” Nodding at the clerk, he closed the door.

The warehouse was closer to the docks, so Jack gave the wagon new directions, then they headed back toward the docks in search of the designated warehouse. It proved to be one of the largest buildings in Calabar, built of timber, as were most of the buildings, save for those of native design, which were often constructed of withy, topped with thatch. Jack tried one half of the double doors, large enough to admit a wagon, only to find the entrance was locked from the inside. Undaunted, and by now thoroughly annoyed, he banged on the portal with his fist. “Mr. Blount? You there? Open up, please! I need to speak with you!”

As he raised his hand to bang on the door again, he heard footsteps approaching from inside the warehouse, then a padlock clicked. The door opened, allowing a blade of sunshine to pierce the gloomy interior. Port-master Blount, a thin, almost cadaverous man of middle years, with wispy gray hair and a thick, luxuriant beard, appeared, followed by a slender African youth, scarcely more than a lad.

The portmaster stepped through the door, blinking at the sudden transition from darkness to light. “Who is that? Captain Sparrow? What’s going on? This is most irregular. You need to make an appointment with my clerk. I’m very busy at the moment.”

Jack flashed an insincere smile at the man. “So sorry to have troubled you, Portmaster Blount, but I’m afraid my errand is urgent. I’m preparing to set sail within a few days, and I need to provision my ship.” He cocked an eyebrow at the man. “My EITC vessel, the *Wicked Wench*. Mr. Beckett’s own ship.”

Blount’s pinched features did not change in the slightest. He was a cool-headed scoundrel. “The *Wicked Wench*?” He was the picture of innocence. “Why, I

dispatched the first load of provisions to her just today, Captain Sparrow! You didn't receive them?"

Jack took a deep breath, controlling the urge to grab Blount and throttle him. Every time he thought about discovering, after a week, two weeks, perhaps even a month at sea that half his provisions weren't fit to feed dogs, much less his crew, the notion of sailing his ship back to the EITC docks and loosing a broadside at the EITC warehouse seemed like a better idea. *Does he only try this trick with newcomers? Charging the EITC for real provisions and substituting rotted trash? And, of course, pocketing a tidy profit!*

"I brought them back, Mr. Blount, is what I did," Jack said. Turning, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, then beckoned.

A moment later, his crewmen came into view, with the overloaded wagon. "And unless you immediately furnish me with my full stowage of clean flour, and vermin-free biscuit, plus salt beef and pork that won't run through a man like seawater through a breached hull, my men are going to take these barrels up the street to Mr. Beckett's office and take them inside." Jack glared at Blount. "And then, perhaps, we'll tell Mr. Beckett where they came from, just before we spill them on the floor, eh, mate?"

Blount did not react to this suggestion, but the African lad, evidently his slave, did. His eyes widened, then his mouth quirked as he stifled a smile. *He understood what I said*, Jack thought. For a moment his eyes met those of the youth, then the lad looked down at his bare feet.

The portmaster raised a hand slightly. "Captain Sparrow, I must say that I have no idea what you are fussing about. The provisions I dispatched to you were of the highest quality. I ordered Chamba here," he indicated the slave, "to load them himself, after showing him where to find the correct supplies." Turning to the lad, he addressed him

rapidly in the pidgin dialect that was commonly used among the slaves and slavers in Calabar.

The lad shook his head side to side, murmuring a soft-voiced reply.

Hearing what appeared to be the slave's denial, Blount finally showed some emotion. His pinched features tightened with rage, then he drew back his arm and backhanded the lad across the face, hard enough to drive him to his knees. As the young slave cowered on the ground, both hands raised to shield his head from more blows, Jack's hands tightened into fists. Stepping forward, he grabbed the portmaster's arm before the man could deliver another blow, turning him around so he could see the man's face. "Just a minute, Mr. Blount," Jack said. "What did you ask him? I don't speak the local lingo, mate."

Blount faced Jack, the rage vanishing from his features as though it had never been there. "I asked Chamba whether he loaded the barrels designated for your vessel with the supplies I indicated, and he told me that instead of doing that, he loaded the barrels from supplies that hadn't passed inspection, and were marked to be destroyed!" the portmaster said, anger creeping back into his voice. "This stupid damned blackamoor actually *admitted* what he'd done!"

Jack's eyes narrowed. "But why would a slave do that? It's not like he could sell what he didn't put into those barrels." Slaves weren't permitted to engage in any business transactions; not legally, anyhow.

Blount shrugged. "It's not like he did it for a *reason*, Captain. They're like animals, you know, so stupid they can't remember anything for more than a minute or two." He turned around to glare at the youth, still crouched in the dust. When he turned back, his features were composed once more. "I'm sorry, Captain Sparrow. I'll reissue your supplies immediately, and you may be sure that Chamba

will be lashed within an inch of his miserable life as soon as you've gotten your supplies and are on your way."

Jack stared at Blount, trying to picture the situation Blount had described—but he just couldn't credit it. There had been too much intelligence and humor in Chamba's eyes when they'd shared that glance over the idea of Jack dumping rotten meat and flour on the floor of Cutler Beckett's frighteningly tidy office.

No, Blount was lying to try to cover his own perfidy. The portmaster had made an attempt to line his own pockets, and Jack had caught him at it. Why else had the bad provisions had a layer of good stuff on top, if they weren't part of a plan to disguise their unsavory contents, and send the *Wicked Wench* on her way loaded with supplies that were too old or too improperly cured to be acceptable?

Jack raised a skeptical brow, then shifted his weight to look past the portmaster at the slave. "Is that true, Chamba?" he asked. "You loaded the *Wicked Wench*'s barrels with rotted meat and infested biscuit because you couldn't remember which barrels to use? Did you even load those barrels, the ones destined for delivery to my ship?"

Chamba shook his head very slightly from side to side. His lips moved, forming the word "No."

"Don't bother addressing him in a civilized language, Captain," Blount said, dismissively. "Chamba doesn't understand English."

That's what you think, Jack thought. Again, his eyes met the youngster's frightened, pleading gaze. He dropped his eyes, wishing there were something he could do. But Chamba was property, here in Calabar—expensive property.

Jack had been paid for his voyage aboard *Fair Wind*, and he actually still had some of his pay left—which was highly unusual. Normally, when sailors reached port after a voyage and got their pay, they headed for the taverns, the gaming hells, and the bawdy houses. When their money ran out, they staggered back to their ships, their heads pounding

and their purses empty. The only reason Jack still had money left from his voyage aboard *Fair Wind* was that he'd been working so hard on fitting out the *Wench* that he hadn't had time for the (admittedly limited) diversions offered in Calabar. But he knew without even counting that the coins in his purse weren't enough to purchase a slave. Much as he'd have liked to help the lad, Jack couldn't afford to get involved.

Portmaster Blount was looking at him questioningly, and Jack hastily reviewed what the man had just said, and responded. "Very well, Portmaster. You make good on my supplies, and throw in a few extra treats—some nice smoked hams, perhaps, or an extra barrel of yams or fruit—and Mr. Beckett won't have to know about this. But I'll be on the lookout from now on, you may be sure."

"That's decent of you, Captain Sparrow," Blount said. "When will you be shipping out?"

"We should be finished fitting out the *Wench* by sunset," Jack said. "Then we've a cargo to load tomorrow. We'll be departing early the following morning."

"I see. Well, then, let me call my warehouse crew, and we'll prepare replacement provisions for you immediately."

Jack watched the casks and barrels as they were filled with a sharp eye, and finally confessed himself satisfied with the first shipment of replacement supplies. Blount promised to have the remaining provisions waiting at the dock the next morning, early.

Jack made a mental note to inspect every barrel.

It was a long row back to the *Wicked Wench*, and the sun was low in the sky by the time Jack and his laden longboats, plus one of the enormous native cargo canoes, reached the middle of the broad Calabar River.

The Calabar was full of traffic—canoes ferrying people or cargo, either upriver toward native villages or toward the slave ships that sat anchored out in the middle of the big river, waiting for their holds to be filled with their terror-

stricken, agonized cargo. As his men rowed along, Jack could see the enormous canoes of the slave traders being rowed by their slave crews. These canoes were so huge they could carry 120 passengers. Armed guards kept watch over the slaves, lest any try to break free and leap overboard. Remembering the fear in young Chamba's eyes, Jack sighed. *A filthy business….*

Jack made a mental note to drop by Mr. Beckett's office tomorrow, and inform the EITC director just what his portmaster had been up to. He didn't feel constrained by his half-promise to Blount. The man was an unrepentant rascal, and Beckett, as well as the EITC ships, would be better off without him.

Not for the first time, he was grateful to his new supervisor for allowing him to sail a regular cargo vessel, rather than a slave ship. Perhaps, when this voyage was concluded, he'd think about leaving Africa and signing aboard ships going the other way, heading for the Orient, or India, rather than staying here and sailing the Triangle.

Ships heading for Europe or England from the coast of west Africa did not sail north to reach those destinations, because if they did so, the wind would be against them. The trade winds blew west from Africa, so vessels followed a route called the Triangle, first heading west, across the Atlantic, then turning to sail north along the coast of North America. Only off the coast of Greenland, or Newfoundland, were they able to turn east, to head for England, or points further south.

Jack sighed. Tempting as the prospect of heading out for distant seas and lands was, if he left Africa, he'd lose Cutler Beckett's patronage. Would any other EITC director be willing to keep him as a captain, at his age? He knew he was probably one of the youngest captains currently working for the huge company. One of the main reasons he'd been promoted, Jack knew, was the fact that there were more EITC ships sailing out of Africa than almost anywhere else.

That was because slaves were the most valuable and desirable cargo at present.

Jack stared at the river and shook his head slightly. It was too bad about Chamba, but it wasn't his problem. If Benjamin Blount was even now whipping the lad to death, there wasn't anything he could do about it. Jack remembered with relief that in less than two days, he'd be back at sea, where he wanted to be more than anywhere else. Calabar and its shackled "cargoes" would be behind him for five months, possibly more.

Determinedly, he turned his thoughts to the expensive cargo he'd be loading tomorrow, bound for Liverpool. Ivory, a chest of gold ingots, some valuable woods, bales of coir (coconut husks), spices, and foodstuffs would fill the cargo deck of his vessel. Precious cargo, indeed.

In view of this, Jack was pleased that, in response to his request for more armament, Mr. Beckett had allowed two more twelve-pounders to be installed on the main deck with the other twelve-pounders. He'd have liked to have a couple more six-pounders on the weather deck, but he'd try for that next voyage.

When the longboats and cargo canoes reached the *Wicked Wench*, Jack was pleased to see that she was once more upright and floating, her hull now clean and well-protected. When ships were careened, the work perforce occurred at low tide, since at full high tide, the ships were once more afloat. It was high tide now, and Robby must have just brought the crew aboard, so they'd be ready to take the ship back down the tributary to the mouth of the Calabar, and the docks.

Jack didn't plan to actually dock until tomorrow. Tonight they'd anchor in the river, give the crew a chance to rest up from their labors, so they'd be fresh on the morrow, when it was time to load and stow their cargo.

There was little breeze, so he dispatched several boats to tow the *Wench* out of the tributary and into the main flow

of the Calabar River. Even though night was falling, rowing the boats to tow the *Wench* was hot, thirsty work, but Jack had plenty of men begging to man an oar, since he offered an extra ration of rum for each volunteer. He noted with some amusement that Featherstone and de Ver, still arguing the respective merits of their countries, were among the first into the boats. Their voices drifted up to him as he stood on the weather deck while their longboat was lowered.

"You English have no art, no culture. Even your food—pah! French dogs turn their noses up at it."

"I'll put a good steak and kidney pie up against anything you frogs can stir up. Everyone knows frogs eat flies."

Another voice spoke up. "Aw, stow it, you two, or you'll both be swimming back to the bloody ship."

Quiet ensued. Jack laughed softly.

Later, after the ship was anchored securely in the river, her lanterns lit so any late-roaming canoe could see her, Jack finally retired to the captain's cabin to eat a late supper and update his logbook. It had been a long day. When he finished his log entry, and his supper, he sat back in his chair with a sigh. It was a hot evening, but, luckily for him, the wind was blowing Calabar's multitude of insect life to leeward, so he dared to open the windows and allow the night breeze to cool the cabin. With a sigh of pleasure, he took off his coat, his neckcloth, and his waistcoat.

Then Jack stood for a moment in his spacious cabin, just enjoying the fact that it was *his* cabin. It gleamed softly in the lantern's glow, bright with fresh paint. Cutler Beckett had provided the money for the royal blue, tan, yellow and gold paint freshly applied to the *Wench*'s fixtures and railings, plus a jaunty stripe highlighting her gun ports, but if a captain wanted his cabin painted, it was his responsibility to buy the paint. Jack had gone looking for inexpensive paint in the marketplace of Calabar, and had found some that must have been used to paint a parlor, or trim, in some

European’s home. Periwinkle blue, it was—and startling in its intensity.

That was fine with Jack. He liked vivid trappings. Unable to dress as colorfully as he had in Shipwreck Cove, at least he could indulge himself in his own living quarters. The only problem was, the periwinkle paint had barely been enough to cover the walls. There hadn’t been enough to do the trim, so Jack perforce had to go bargain-hunting through the marketplace again. He was just a little dubious about the trim color, to be honest, but he was sure he’d get used to it. It reminded him of the afterglow of a Caribbean sunset.

The cabin boasted a wide bunk, big enough for two—after years of sleeping in hammocks, it was wonderful to be able to stretch out—and a table where he could unroll his charts and plot courses. There was a leaded-glass skylight overhead, and a bank of big, leaded casement windows that allowed him to look out and see the view from the stern of his ship. On either side of the cabin were bulges that overhung the hull below, called the quarter gallery. The quarter gallery on the port side housed a small enclosure fitted out with shelves and drawers, known as the captain’s pantry. There Jack could store food he’d bought for himself, wine, rum, his pewter eating utensils, plates, and goblets. At the moment the pantry was relatively bare. He hadn’t had sufficient money to buy much—yet.

On the starboard side of the quarter gallery there was another enclosed space—the captain’s private head. Such luxury! Not having to traipse topside to the bow in a storm to relieve oneself was something Jack was looking forward to getting used to.

He was enjoying having privacy and room to relax. And, even more importantly, lots of hiding places.

Ever since he’d begun going to sea, Jack had always kept an eye open for concealed hidey-holes on the ships he’d crewed, places where he could secrete items he wanted to keep hidden. And he’d always found them. But

now he had a whole cabin where he could create his own personal stashes.

Sound from the Calabar River drifted through the open window. Someone on one of the slave ships was screaming. The sound was muted, faraway, but it was still enough to make Jack want to drown it with a long draught of his own special rum. And, since he'd finished his log entry, and had nothing else to do that night except sleep—barring emergencies—he felt safe in removing a bottle of his special supply from his brand-new hiding place.

Jack sauntered into the captain's head, and gazed with satisfaction at the broad seat with its hole that was no longer centered. Jack had hired a carpenter in Calabar to remake the seat for him.

Reaching beneath the lip of the wood to the left of the hole, Jack released a latch that wasn't visible unless one knew it was there. There was a soft sound, then that side of the wide, enclosed "bench" moved. Grasping the edge of the seat, Jack lifted, and the entire left side of the boards rose up and swung back, revealing a box built beneath. It wasn't large, but it was fairly deep, nearly three feet deep by two and a half feet wide. One could conceal a lot of contraband in there.

Not that Jack was planning on engaging in any smuggling activities. Of course not! But one never knew when one might need a good hiding place, did one?

At the moment, the box held Jack's private stash of rum. Much better quality rum than the EITC normally issued to its merchant ships. Smiling, Jack bent over and retrieved a bottle.

After removing the cork, he took a long swig, feeling the tensions of the day loosen their hold on him. The rum was very smooth, very good. He had another draught. *That's good*, he thought, with a happy sigh. *Very, very good.*

He took the bottle back to his chair and sat down. Swinging his legs up, he tipped his chair back and had

another drink, rolling the rum around on his tongue before swallowing it, feeling the pleasant burn as it coursed down his throat, awakening a glow in his stomach.

He was completely relaxed now, all thoughts of the miserable cargo crammed into the bellies of the ships surrounding him gone, blotted out. Visions of the lad Chamba being whipped vanished like fog fleeing before strong sunlight.

*Ahhhh…*he thought, in pure contentment, having another sip. *Much better. This is more like it.*

“Cap’n Sparrow?”

Jack thought he heard what sounded like a human voice, faint and quavering. It echoed eerily in the still night.

Jack’s eyes flew open. He was completely alone in his cabin. *There’s no one but me here*, he reassured himself.

“Cap’n Sparrow?” the disembodied voice said again, louder.

Jack nearly fell over backward. Only good balance and quick reflexes, learned from dangerous years as a topman, kept him from crashing over, or, the sea gods forbid, spilling his high quality rum. The front legs of his chair slammed to the deck and the captain sat bolt upright, every nerve on edge. “Who’s there?” he demanded of the air.

“Cap’n Sparrow…” the faint voice came again. “It’s me, Chamba. Help.”

Jack groaned aloud. *Not another bloody ghost!* He glanced at the rum bottle, still in his hand, then carefully set it down and corked it. He’d definitely had enough for tonight. Maybe, he thought, hopefully, it was all a delusion, brought on by the rum. But he had a bad feeling that he hadn’t imagined that disembodied voice. Over the years, Jack Sparrow had seen his share—and more—of supernatural happenings. Just knowing Tia Dalma guaranteed that one would see things that were not of this earth.

Damn that bastard, Blount, he thought. *He really did whip the lad to death, but why is the poor bloke here now, haunting **ME**?*

"Chamba?" Jack said aloud. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you, lad, I really am. But there's nothing to be gained by haunting me. Go visit Blount, perhaps you can frighten him into an apoplexy—which the bastard bloody well deserves."

"Cap'n Sparrow?" There was strain in the voice, now, mixed with desperation. "Please, help! I ain't no ghost, I'm me. I be hanging here, outside the window."

Jack turned to look at the open windows. He narrowed his eyes, peering into the dimness—and saw eight dark, cylindrical objects hooked over the bottom frame of the open window. Eight…fingers.

With one bound, Jack was across the cabin, peering out and down. There, balanced precariously on one of the carvings supporting the quarter gallery, was Chamba, very much alive, desperately holding on to the bottom of the window. The youth was nearly naked, and even in the dimness Jack could see that his back was striped and pulpy. Jack swore under his breath. *This is all I need!*

"How the devil did you get here, Chamba?"

The lad looked up at him imploringly. His arms were shaking from the effort of holding himself in place against the side of the ship. If Jack didn't haul him in soon, he'd lose his grip and fall back into the river.

"Cap'n Sparrow, when Mr. Blount finished with the whippin' he promised, I played dead. He kick me like a dead dog, then he left me there. When he done gone, I dragged me down to the river. Found me a log, hung on to it, and crawled into the water. I been in the water for a long time, kickin', paddlin', trying to find you. Cap'n…please?"

"Why does this kind of thing always happen to me?" Jack demanded plaintively, under his breath. For a moment he was tempted to just turn away. This wasn't his problem.

He had enough troubles of his own, without adding this complication.

But he discovered he couldn't stand by and watch the lad fall, knowing he'd drown. Jack opened the window all the way, and the one beside it, too. "This is going to hurt, Chamba," he warned the youth. "Don't make a sound."

"Not me, Cap'n," the boy promised.

Chamba was as good as his word. Jack grabbed his forearms, braced himself, and hauled upward with all his might. The slave gasped, but made no other sound. Instead he pushed upward with his bare feet, climbing the hull, thrusting himself upward off his precarious support. Grunting with effort, Jack heaved until he saw stars, and between them they got the youth's body pulled up until his arms, then his shoulders, were in the cabin. Then, holding him balanced with one hand, Jack managed to lean out the other window, and snag a fistful of Chamba's only garment, a breechclout. He dragged him upward again, until the lad's belly crossed the sill. With one more heave, he eased the runaway's dark legs over the bottom of the casement.

Chamba collapsed to the deck on his side and lay still. He'd fainted from the pain.

Seeing his back in the lamplight, Jack cursed Blount in three languages. Those stripes needed treatment, or they'd be sure to fester. Quickly he rolled the lad onto his stomach, then went in search of the bottle of ship's rum he kept in his captain's pantry.

Luckily for Chamba, he didn't regain consciousness as Jack poured rum into his wounds. The captain squatted on his heels beside the youth's unconscious form, thinking. He knew that by rights he ought to take the kid straight back to Blount—but it just wasn't in him to do that. What should he do? Take him to Mr. Beckett and tell him the whole story? Jack shook his head. Beckett might discipline or dismiss Blount from his post for tampering with the provisions, but

he wouldn’t break the law. He’d hand the slave over to his owner.

Maybe he could keep him here, hide him aboard ship for a couple of days, then drop him off somewhere, with no one the wiser. Jack nodded slightly. That could work. Maybe he could set his course for the Cape Verde Islands, and let Chamba go there.

He knew as surely as the sun would rise in the east that Blount would start out searching for the lad. As soon as he realized his slave was still alive, he’d look everywhere for his property. He might well come by the *Wicked Wench*. Jack was fairly sure that Blount had realized that Jack had some sympathy for Chamba. If he was going to hide him for a few days, he needed to figure out how to do it.

Rising, he went into the captain’s pantry, and returned with a pewter goblet full of watered wine, and some bread and cheese from his own private store. Setting them on the table, he went over to his sea chest and hunted up an old shirt that looked fairly clean, though it was stained. Tomorrow he’d check the slop chest that contained the crew’s castoff clothing, to see whether there was anything the lad could wear. Even though he had to be in his teens, the youth was small and thin for his age—doubtless Blount saw no reason to feed a slave well.

After a few more minutes, Chamba began to stir, then he moaned and tried to sit up. Jack helped him, until the boy was able to sit cross-legged on the deck, still swaying weakly. “Thirsty?” Jack said, holding out the goblet.

Despite his obvious eagerness, Chamba was careful not to spill any of the liquid. He drained the cup, then drew a long breath. “Thanks, Cap’n.”

“You’re welcome. Here, have something to eat,” he said, holding out the bread and cheese. “Eat slowly. You don’t want to get sick.”

The lad nibbled away at the bread, then swallowed a mouthful or two of the cheese. Jack put the leftovers on a

plate. He sat down on the deck opposite Chamba, and said, “Why did you come to me? Why didn’t you run and hide in the woods, upriver?”

The runaway lowered his eyes and shook his head. “I’d be caught by now if I done that, Cap’n. They got dogs. I knew I was bleedin’ and they smell that.”

Jack nodded. “I see.”

The youth gazed at him with those pleading dark eyes. “I’m sorry, Cap’n. I know it be dangerous for you. But I couldn’t think of nowhere else. That’s why I didn’t run before. Ain’t the first time he done this, though it be the worst.”

Jack had no trouble believing that. He nodded grimly.

“I just…let go. Went away in here,” Chamba touched his forehead. “Played dead. Give him what he wanted. Blount, he angry ’cause you caught him puttin’ the condemned stuff into those barrels. He done it before, but nobody catch him till you.”

“It’s not your fault I caught him,” Jack pointed out.

The youth gave him a look that spoke volumes. “So? What difference that make, Cap’n? Blount, when he need someone to beat, he find someone, best believe.”

“I know,” Jack said. “Listen, Chamba, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’ve decided to help you. I’ll be sailing within a day. I can take you and drop you off somewhere.”

“Somewhere? Where can I go?” Chamba’s eyes were wide with fear.

“That’s what we’ll have to figure out,” Jack said. “Where is—was—your home? Before you were captured?” He was wondering if there was some way to arrange for the lad to be taken back home. It didn’t seem likely.

“My home, it be gone, Cap’n. The slavers take the whole village, they take everyone. Burn what left. They take my mother, my father, my sisters…they kill my old granddad, ’cause him not keepin’ up. No home left, Cap’n Sparrow.”

“Oh,” Jack said. “I see.” *How can men be so vile?* he wondered. “That’s a predicament, then, Chamba. A problem,” he translated, seeing that the youth didn’t understand the long word. “I have to sail away,” he explained. “And when I do that, what’s to become of you?”

The lad looked at him. “Going with you, Cap’n, please. Stay here, on the ship. The ship, she be free. Your sailor men, they free. Me, I want become like them. A sailor man. Learn the sailor trade. Sail far away from here.” The disgust in the word “here” spoke volumes.

Jack blinked. “Oh.” It hadn’t occurred to him that Chamba had fled to him with a plan, but he should have realized. The lad was smart—and cunning. Good qualities in a sailor. And there was no denying his courage. He thought it over, taking his time, while Chamba sat there, tense with mingled hope and fear.

Their voyage would take at least four or five months. At Chamba’s age, that could make a big difference in a boy’s appearance. Five months of enough food would put some muscle on that skinny frame. He might get a bit taller. His beard was just starting to come in, which was a good sign. They could shave his head, perhaps. By the time they came back to Calabar, he might well be unrecognizable as that runaway skinny runt of a slave. And just to make sure, he’d order the kid to stay hidden while they were in port.

Jack sighed. *I hope I won’t regret this….*

“All right,” he agreed. “You can start in as cabin boy, and cook’s assistant, while you learn how to rig the sails, and all the rest of what it takes to be a sailor.”

For the first time, a light sparked in Chamba’s eyes, and he smiled. The expression transformed his face. “Aye, Cap’n! I be a good sailor man, the best! You will see!”

Jack held out the shirt. “Here. Put this on. Keep the dirt out of those wounds.”

With a hiss of pain, Chamba eased the shirt over his head. It was so long it fell past his hips. Jack handed him a

blanket. “You can make yourself a bed in my pantry. There’s enough room in there for you to stretch out. The doors close.”

“Aye, Cap’n.” Gamely, Chamba climbed to his feet and limped after him to arrange his sleeping place.

“And over here is the head,” Jack said, and took him to the other side of the cabin to show him the other enclosure overhanging the quarter gallery. While he was standing there, looking at the head, something occurred to him, and he looked at the youth. “If Mr. Blount comes to the ship tomorrow, looking for you, you’ll need to hide, understand? I’ll give you some warning. If you hear me rap on the door to my cabin, one rap, hide.” He demonstrated.

Chamba nodded. “Where, Cap’n?”

“I think you can fit in here. I’ll move the rum out… temporarily.” Jack opened the hidden compartment, leaned over, and pulled out the bottles. He stowed them away in the pantry. When he came back, Chamba was staring down into the box-like hiding area.

Jack looked at it, then at the lad. “Can you can fit in there?” he asked, dubiously.

“Aye, Cap’n,” Chamba said. “If fitting mean Mr. Blount don’t catch me, I fit.”

“All right, then. Make sure you don’t leave any sign that you’ve been here in the cabin, savvy? Er…understand? If Blount comes here, I’ll make sure this is the last place he comes in. That should give you time to hide.”

“Aye, Cap’n. Hide good, that’s me.”

After he’d settled the youth in the pantry, Jack stripped down to his drawers, then blew out the lantern. He’d wondered if he’d lie awake, but the long day, coupled with the effort of hauling the runaway through the window, had tired him. It wasn’t long before he slept.

The next day he was up at dawn, making sure the cargo hold and other stowage areas were ready for use. Blount was as good as his word.

The remainder of Jack's provisions arrived on the dock and were loaded aboard—*after* Jack and Robby had checked every container.

Scarcely had they finished stowing the provisions before the cargo itself made its appearance. Both Jack and Robby were busy for hours, making sure everything was stowed securely, and, when necessary, fastened down so it wouldn't shift during rough weather.

Barely half the cargo had been loaded when Blount showed up, with three slave hunters.

Jack, summoned to the gangplank leading from the dock to the deck, leaned over the railing and looked down at the portmaster with a big grin. He waved cheerfully. "'Morning, Portmaster Blount! Here to check on your provision delivery? They arrived in fine shape, thanks very much! I adore smoked ham!"

Blount shook his head slowly, scowling. "No, Captain Sparrow. We're here about my slave, Chamba. He ran away last night. The dogs tracked him to the river. I think he must've been planning to stow away on a ship. We've checked all the others. Yours is the last. We'd like your permission to search the *Wicked Wench*."

Jack did a well-feigned double take. "Your slave? The one so stupid he couldn't come in out of the rain? In the river?" Jack surveyed the huge, muddy river, deep and filled with currents. "Could he swim?"

"Not that I know of," replied Blount, with exaggerated patience.

"Well, then, he's likely drowned, eh?" Jack said, with hearty good cheer. "Or eaten by a crocodile. Bit of a nuisance, I suppose, but at least you won't be put to the trouble of burying him."

"Perhaps. May we search your ship?"

Jack rolled his eyes theatrically. "Oh, very well. If you *must*. Come aboard."

Blount and his companions trudged up the gangway and stepped onto the weather deck. “Mr. Greene!” Jack called, waving the first mate over.

Robby arrived a moment later. “Yes, Captain Sparrow?”

Jack gestured at Blount and his henchmen. “Portmaster Blount here thinks we might have a stowaway. I want you to take him down to the bilges, and let them look for him, working your way up through the ship. But don’t disarrange the stowed cargo.” He gave the portmaster a meaningful glance. “The holds were nearly empty until this morning, when your supplies arrived, and then our cargo. My men have worked hard, stowing it. Any stowaway would have been visible, Mr. Blount.”

“Very well,” the portmaster said, grudgingly.

Robby shot Jack a suspicious glance as he led the party away. Jack smiled blandly, waving him on.

The captain was down on the cargo deck, overseeing the stowage, when he heard Blount and his party climbing up from the orlop and the bilges. Quickly Jack instructed his second mate, a grizzled old Irishman named Frank Connery, to keep an eye on everything, then climbed back up to the weather deck. Sauntering across it, keeping a sharp eye on the cargo still coming up the gangplank, he headed aft, toward his cabin, which was actually an enclosed extension of the weather deck.

When he reached it, he didn’t pause, but rapped sharply on the locked cabin door in passing, then continued on his round.

Perhaps ten minutes later, Robby appeared with the sweating and disheveled portmaster and the slave hunters. Jack waved to them cheerfully. “Isn’t she a beautiful vessel, Mr. Blount? She’s fast, I can tell. She’ll do the EITC proud.”

The portmaster waved all this aside with a glare. “We’ve searched everywhere except your cabin, Captain.”

Jack raised his eyebrows in astonishment. “*My* cabin? Why, it’s always kept locked, Portmaster. No runaway could

have gotten in there."

"Nevertheless, I need to see it. Please take me in there." The port-master paused for a beat. "Unless you have something to hide, Captain Sparrow."

Jack made a moue of annoyance, then shrugged exaggeratedly. "Oh, very well." He was being his most fey, mincing self, an act that he'd found caused most men to underestimate him…often to their regret.

Turning, he led them to the cabin. When they reached it, he took out his keys, but glared at the portmaster. "*You* may come in, Mr. Blount, and search to your wizened little heart's content, but I'm not having these hulking louts tramping around in my cabin, stealing my private stock of rum, and goodness knows what else."

The portmaster gestured at his men. "Wait here."

Jack nodded and opened the door, then stepped in, waving the portmaster after him.

After a first, anxious moment, he was reassured to see that the cabin looked almost as it should—somewhat tidier, to be honest, for Chamba seemed to have made the bunk up neatly. *Starting his job as cabin boy*, Jack realized. No sign that the slave had ever been there was visible.

Quickly, Jack glanced at the head—and froze. There was a half-inch crack showing where the secret hatch beside the hole hadn't closed all the way. He cleared his throat. "You'll excuse me, Portmaster," he chirped, "if I just take this opportunity to pump the bilges."

He stepped into the head, closing the door behind him, and then, to make it look good, actually undid his britches, shuffling his feet and whistling between his teeth as he reached over and quietly eased the hatch all the way closed. The secret storage area hadn't been designed to be closed from the *inside*—no wonder the lad hadn't been able to pull it all the way down after him.

After a minute or so, Jack hitched up his britches, then, still fussing with the top buttons, he stepped out of the

head. Portmaster Blount was lying on his stomach, peering under the bunk. “Is he there?” cried Jack, jovially.

“No,” said the portmaster, between his teeth, as he sat up.

“Don’t forget to check the head,” Jack said, waving a gracious hand at his private facility. “He might be hiding in the hole, eh?”

Blount didn’t dignify this sally with a response, only glanced grimly into the small enclosure, then slammed the door behind him. He stood there, sweating, his neckcloth rumpled and dirty, his wispy hair standing on end, his coat askew, obviously furious and searching for some kind of parting shot.

“Really, Captain Sparrow,” he said finally, in acid tones, waving at Jack’s cabin, “what in the name of all that’s holy got into you? Baby blue and…*pink*?”

Jack was genuinely affronted. “It’s *periwinkle*, Mr. Blount,” he said. “And rose. I…I quite like it!”

Blount’s only response was a wordless growl. He stalked past Jack, and out the door.

Still nettled by the portmaster’s lack of good taste, Jack left the cabin, locking the door behind him.

The next morning, at dawn, the *Wicked Wench* left the docks of Calabar, her sails billowing as the crewmen worked to catch the dawn breezes. She sailed down the huge, muddy river, to the Atlantic, and headed out onto the open sea.

Jack’s next problem was how to produce Chamba without any of his crew suspecting that the youth was, in fact, the runaway slave that Blount had been so publicly searching for their last day in Calabar. Checking their course, he verified that he could easily divert to the Cape Verde Islands, with a loss of only a handful of days in their passage.

So he took Robby into his confidence, introduced him to the runaway, and then, three days after they'd departed Calabar, with much fanfare, Jack and Robby together "discovered" several barrels of "spoiled biscuit" amongst those Blount had delivered to their hold. With great cursing and fanfare, the two officers loudly dumped the offensive contents of these "spoiled" barrels overboard as the *Wicked Wench* made her way north after swinging around the bulge of Africa.

Jack made a point of remarking within the hearing of his crew that he wasn't a captain to stint a man or put his crew on short rations if he could avoid it, so they'd put in at St. Jago, the largest of the Cape Verde Islands, to replace the lost ship's biscuit.

It was difficult, keeping Chamba hidden for the entire ten days it took the *Wicked Wench* to reach the island, but Jack was motivated and Chamba was willing to do anything it took to have the chance to become a "sailor man." They had one or two narrow squeaks during the trip, when Jack's meals were delivered to him in his cabin, or officers reported to him, but they managed.

As they neared St. Jago, Jack gloomily surveyed the contents of his purse, reflecting that finally he'd managed to save some money, only to have to spend it replacing perfectly good ship's biscuit. But there was no help for it. He grumpily resolved to stop the amount out of Chamba's wages for the voyage.

When the *Wicked Wench* was safely docked in the harbor of Ribeira Grande, the largest settlement on St. Jago, Jack went into town to purchase replacement barrels of ship's biscuit.

By the time it had been delivered in mid-afternoon, Jack had decided, he informed his crew, to lay over for the night. Generously, he extended several hours of shore leave to his men, one watch at a time. Grinning, the first contingent of crewmen set off for the town.

Jack casually mentioned that he'd decided the *Wench* needed a cabin boy and cook's assistant, and asked them all to keep their eyes open for a likely lad.

Ribeira Grande had been settled about two hundred and fifty years earlier by the Portuguese. It was a fair-sized town that was a common stop for Atlantic crossing vessels to refill water barrels, since the Cape Verde Islands were the last land until one reached the Caribbees, the outermost islands of the Caribbean in a ship's "Triangle" passage.

St. Jago was a pretty island, green along the shoreline, with two mountain ranges in the interior. Beautiful white sand beaches stretched out to either side of the harbor. Wistfully, Jack leaned on the railing of the *Wicked Wench*, looking at the lights of the town and wishing he could have a few hours of shore leave himself. Being captain was certainly different than being a hand before the mast. In a way, higher rank meant less freedom—at least personal freedom.

The captain sighed, shrugging philosophically. After all, he had his ship, and he had the rank he'd wanted for years. The *Wicked Wench* had proved herself, so far, to be everything he'd envisioned back when they'd been working to get her shipshape back in Calabar. She was maneuverable and she was *fast*—deceptively fast for her size. At least as fast as *Venganza*, though of course a full load of cargo was a considerable disadvantage.

Jack relaxed, enjoying the colors of the sunset. He had a task to do, but it had to wait for full darkness.

When Chamba left the ship, via Jack's windows, he was dangling on the end of a rope, the end of which was held by Robby Greene. Jack was still out on deck, waiting for the appointed time. At the right moment, he adjusted the small bundle of clothing he had hidden beneath his coat, then headed down the gangplank into the darkness.

He met Chamba, as arranged, out amid the sand dunes, past the edge of the town. Quickly, the lad shed his wet

clothes, and changed into the dry ones Jack had brought—a rough shirt from the slop chest, and a pair of britches Robby had outgrown years before. Just in case any of the crew might remember the lad from that day at the warehouse, Jack had brought a knife with him so he could cut his wiry coils of hair. He worked for a while with the freshly sharpened blade, cropping the growth as close to the youth's skull as he could manage. It definitely changed his appearance, Jack decided, studying him in the moonlight.

Chamba shoved his wet clothes into an old sack, then felt his shorn head. "How it look, Cap'n?"

"Makes you look older," Jack said. "Here, tie this bandanna around, like this." He helped the youth tie the scrap of faded cloth that had once been black around his head. "Much better!" he pronounced, studying the former slave. "I doubt if even Blount would recognize you. At least in this light."

Chamba grinned, then squatted on his heels and scooped out a hole to bury the handfuls of hair.

"So what about your name? Should we change it?" Jack asked.

"My name…it be all I got left, Cap'n," the lad said, his voice even, but Jack could see the sudden tension in his shoulders as he dug. "All that be left from beforetime, from mom and dad family, you know?"

"Is Chamba a common name?"

Chamba considered. "Pretty much so, yes."

"Then keep it."

Chamba nodded. "I will, then."

The youth stood up, his sack slung over his shoulder, to face the captain again. He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Cap'n, I know all what you did for me. You and Mister Robby. I won't forget, me."

Jack made a deprecatory wave. "Come on, mate. Back to the ship. Time to start earning your wages, sailor man."

The young man’s teeth flashed white in the moonlight, and he nodded.

Jack took his newly hired cabin boy back to the ship with him, and, together, they climbed the gangplank.

Robby was waiting for them, and took Chamba in tow, to show him where he’d hang his hammock and introduce him to the cook, a potbellied Englishman named Phineas Taylor. The next morning, before dawn, the new cabin boy was on duty, helping Taylor serve the crewmen their breakfast in the gray light. Some of the sailors who had overindulged the night before waved the lad away when he offered them the lumpy, porridge-like substance made from crumbled ship’s biscuit, flavored with salted meat, that was called “burgoo.” Some took their bowls with a nod and a mumbled word of thanks. Others grabbed them in surly silence.

None of the men gave the newcomer a second glance.

The *Wicked Wench* set out for the Caribbean, and Chamba embarked on his new life.

It took about four weeks for the *Wicked Wench* to reach the vicinity of the Caribbean Sea. Their passage across the Atlantic had been fairly uneventful. Admittedly, it had rained for most of one week, which tended to dampen one’s spirits, but it also provided an opportunity to wash clothes grown stiff with salt residue. They had encountered only one big storm. The *Wench* rode out the tempest undaunted, with no damage to the ship or loss of life.

When his duties allowed, Chamba joined several of the ordinary seamen as Second Mate Connery, Quartermaster Logan, plus some of the senior hands worked on instructing the “landsmen” (inexperienced crewmen) on how to tie knots, repair equipment, splice lines, and master other nautical tasks. He learned quickly, and before they had reached the Caribbean, the lad had been allowed aloft, first

watching the experienced topmen, then assisting them as they rigged and reefed the sails.

Jack, seeing him swarm up the spidery rope ladders, then walk along a yardarm as though it was as wide as a street, exchanged a covert glance and nod with Robby Greene. He'd been much the same way when he'd first been allowed aloft, at the age of ten. When you were young, fear was the last thing on your mind. There was only the exultation of being up so high, of doing a man's job.

As soon as the water beneath the *Wicked Wench*'s keel began to take on the azure tints of the Caribbean, Jack altered his course, turning north by west. He checked his position by sighting the outermost islands of the Caribbees off his port beam, through his spyglass. The first one in the arc of islands was the comparatively large Barbados, then St. Lucia, identifiable by its high mountains, followed by little Martinique, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Antigua, and Barbuda.

The captain's decision to skirt the Caribbean was prompted by his consciousness of the valuable cargo he was carrying, coupled with the vulnerability of his under-gunned vessel. True, he'd organized all available crewmen into gun crews, and begun training them to load, aim, and fire the big guns as quickly and efficiently as possible, but his men still had a long way to go before they'd be ready for battle. And he didn't have much powder to spare for practice.

Jack knew only too well that pirates had eyes and ears throughout the Caribbean, and that news from a paid informant, describing the *Wicked Wench* and reporting she was bound for England with a select cargo of gold, ivory, rare woods, and spices, might well reach the wrong ears. So he decided against docking at any of the established ports. Still, he needed to replenish his water supply, and fresh food was always a plus to sailors.

With this in mind, Jack sat down in his cabin one evening, thinking about the many cays in the vicinity of the

Bahamas. Men on the account were always on the lookout for small, uninhabited, uncharted islands that nevertheless boasted a supply of fresh water, and sometimes even the prospect of fresh fruit, fish, and game animals.

He remembered a cay that Teague had used several times while he'd sailed with him, a smallish one, only two and a half miles long and a mile wide, but it boasted a good clear spring, and teemed with plant and animal life. Holding the image of the unnamed islet fixed in his mind, Jack took out the compass Tia Dalma had given him, back when he'd been younger than Chamba was now, and closed his eyes, concentrating.

When Jack opened his eyes, the needle of the compass was pointing firmly northwest. Smiling, he again concealed the compass, and went forward to take the wheel. Jack steered the ship for several hours, adjusting her course heading slightly as the compass needle indicated. The captain had to be careful not to reveal the compass to his helmsman or any curious crewmember. There was simply no way to easily explain what he had. Crews had mutinied before when they'd decided their captain had gone mad.

Robby, of course, knew about the compass; he owed his life to its ability to point the way to whatever the person holding it desired the most. But it had been years since he'd seen Jack use it steadily, as he was using it that sunny afternoon.

The next morning, Jack was rewarded by the sight of the cay, only a few miles distant. This area of the southern Bahamas was studded with them, some real islands, others just spits of land or rocky outcrops. Coral shoals were common, so navigation had to be pinpoint. As the *Wench* approached the cay, Jack kept two contingents of crewmen busy—both port and starboard—taking depth measurements.

The little cay had no harbor, so Jack dropped anchor half a mile away from it. Quickly, he assigned crews to go out in

the longboats with their water barrels, and also dispatched Second Mate Connery to take a crew of sailors who professed themselves marksmen on a hunting party. Wild boar roamed the island, and the men's eyes lit up at the idea of fresh meat.

Five or six crewmen scurried to get their fishing tackle. Fresh or salted fish was another treat.

As the boat crews returned with the filled water barrels, they reported seeing dozens of large tortoises sunning themselves, so Jack gave permission for several men to go back to capture some. "And find me some fruit," he instructed. "Bananas, coconuts…whatever there is."

"Aye, Cap'n!"

As the afternoon approached, and the hunting parties and water crews returned safely with their boats loaded, Jack even granted himself a few hours of solitary shore leave, leaving Robby, who had gone on one of the earlier shore parties, in command. Taking one of the smaller boats, he rowed himself to the cay, dragging his craft up on a beautiful beach of white sand, with some rocky outcrops that provided a bit of privacy.

Shucking off his clothes, Jack backstroked out to one of the outcrops, and climbed up on a rock shelf, warm beneath his feet from the afternoon sun. Looking down, the water was so clear that even though it had to be at least twenty feet deep, he could see every detail: creatures scuttling along on the bottom, and small, brightly colored fish darting briskly, hither and yon. With a laugh of pure pleasure, Jack flexed his legs and executed a perfect dive into the sea.

He came up smoothly and began to swim, his strokes strong, fast, and sure. Jack didn't remember a time when he hadn't been able to swim. He didn't recall anyone ever teaching him. One of the stories often repeated about him by sailors who had crewed Teague's vessel, *Troubadour*, was about the time an old pirate had asked him where he'd

learned to dive and swim so well, and the five-year-old Jack had responded solemnly, “The mermaids taught me.”

He swam for half an hour, then climbed back up on the rock to sun himself, mindful of the rays reaching parts of him that didn’t get much exposure. Luckily, rock overhangs offered a few shady places.

As he lay there, listening to the soft lapping of the water, enjoying the moment, he found himself thinking back to those days at Shipwreck Cove when he and Esmeralda had rowed off in a small boat, looking for good places to swim….

Their first few weeks together had been, in a word, idyllic. Several times a week, the two young pirate scions had found time to pack up food and a few bottles of Don Rafael’s wine, and row the small dory Esmeralda had appropriated from *Venganza* to several secluded coves they’d discovered.

There they swam, dived into the water, fenced on the beach, shared their lunches, and sipped good wine. They laughed a lot, and they talked as though they’d been deaf and mute until they’d met each other.

Jack was the far better swimmer, and it salved his male ego to have found something that he could do better than Esmeralda, since she could usually defeat him at fencing, due to the extensive tutoring she’d received from her Spanish master of the sword. He coached her in swimming; she coached him in swordplay.

For modesty’s sake, he went swimming in his britches, and she wore an old chemise and petticoat that she had shortened to mid-calf length. The material was, to Jack’s disappointment, substantial enough not to turn transparent when it was wet, though it did outline Esmeralda’s curves enticingly.

They told no one of their trysts, and made efforts not to be seen leaving the cove together. Esmeralda, because she

didn’t want other men thinking she was available to spend private time with them, and Jack, because he didn’t want Teague to know he’d disobeyed him. The day after the Pirate Lords’ colloquy, the Keeper of the Code had pulled Jack aside and given him a stern admonition, followed by a direct order.

Teague’s deeply lined, pockmarked features beneath his broad-brimmed hat had been even more impatient and annoyed than usual as he’d addressed Jack in the empty conference chamber. “Boy,” he’d said, with a glance fraught with warning, “back off. Steer clear. That’s an order. Savvy?”

Jack had blinked at him innocently, not allowing the anger that bubbled up within him to show. “Steer clear of what?” he asked.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Teague grated. “Steer clear of *her*, you misbegotten whelp. She’s a *lady*. Not one of your wanton jades. She’s shoal water, boy, as far as you’re concerned, and don’t forget it.”

Jack had assumed an expression of hurt indignation. “She’s a grown woman. I’m a grown man. If we want to talk to each other at dinner, what objection could there be? I was a perfect gentleman.”

“Don Rafael’s quick with his blade,” Teague said. “Even at his age, he’d spit you like a suckling pig, and I wouldn’t lift my little finger to stop him.” With that, he’d turned and walked away.

Jack had stared after him, rage simmering in his heart, his eyes narrowed. Usually when Teague was that forceful, he’d backed down in the face of direct orders. After all, Teague was his…captain.

But not this time, Jack thought, setting his jaw. He’d found something today, something he’d never encountered before, and he wasn’t giving it up just because Teague thought Esmeralda was too good for him. *I know she’s a lady, but she’s like me…a bit lonely. She wants to be friends.*

There’s nothing wrong with having a woman as a friend, right?

“Bloody damned right,” he’d said, under his breath.

They’d had two weeks of companionship, perfectly innocent companionship. Their swords touched, but that was the only contact between them. Jack didn’t even try to hold her hand. He didn’t want to risk what they had.

And then, early one morning when they’d met at the dory in their pre-arranged meeting spot, Christophe came striding up, all smiles, to ask whether he could join the party.

For the first time in his life, Jack had discovered he was violently jealous of another man—but he didn’t dare show it. Christophe was his friend, and Esmeralda had no idea how he felt about her. Jack had to swallow his resentment and smile.

Esmeralda seemed delighted to have Christophe join their company, and every time she smiled at the older pirate captain, Jack had to exert self-control to keep his expression from betraying his feelings.

For the next ten days, Christophe joined Jack and Esmeralda for nearly every foray. One good thing came out of it—Christophe was an excellent swordsman, and he began tutoring both of the younger fencers, teaching them many moves that weren’t part of classical fencing, but were designed to save one’s life during boarding, or a shipboard fray.

After their first few outings together, Jack realized that Christophe had Esmeralda in his sights. There could be no doubt. Where Jack had been careful not touch her, not to push things, Christophe stood close to her at every opportunity. He never missed a chance to offer her a hand up when they prepared to rise after eating their repast on the beach. When he corrected her swordsmanship, he frequently stood behind her and slid his hand over hers to practice the lunges and parries he’d been demonstrating.

And when he corrected her lunges, he did it in such a way that she wound up pressed against him.

It was obvious to Jack that Christophe intended to seduce Esmeralda.

He had no idea what to do about this realization. It wasn't his place to say anything; he had no claim on Esmeralda. Surely the lady knew what was going on, didn't she? A blind man could see it.

While Jack was still stewing over whether to try to get Esmeralda alone and talk to her about what was happening, something else occurred that, at least temporarily, drove all thought of their embryonic triangle out of his mind.

One day Esmeralda asked Jack and Christophe to be her escorts for an evening's outing. She explained that she'd like to go to their favorite tavern, The Drunken Lady, because she'd heard them speak of it. Her grandfather, however, wouldn't permit her to go unaccompanied. Don Rafael was no fool, so despite her expertise with sword and dagger, Esmeralda was under orders not to go wandering around alone in the lairs and warrens of Shipwreck City.

Several times, Jack had spoken of his friend Steve, the barkeep, and his wife, Marie, and Esmeralda particularly wanted to meet the unusual pair. "I get lonely for the sound of another woman's voice," she commented, sounding wistful. "This Marie sounds like she would be interesting to talk to, and since she is a…respectable married woman, my grandfather wouldn't object to her the way he would to…" she blushed slightly, as Christophe gave her a knowing smirk, "a…you know. Can't you two take me there sometime? I get tired of staying aboard *Venganza* and just *reading* every night!"

Jack glanced at Christophe. "If Don Rafael agrees, I'd be delighted to," he said.

"*Et moi, ma belle*!" Christophe said, with a mocking grin, ostentatiously holding out his hand to her. "I would give my all to be one of your escorts to our fair city."

With a little laugh at his silliness, Esmeralda held her hand out in return. Christophe took his time holding it, then took even longer kissing it. Jack had to bite the inside of his cheek.

The following day, shortly after sunset, Jack and Christophe, dressed in their best (and Jack's "best" was, of course, a far cry from Christophe's brocaded splendor), presented themselves at *Venganza*'s dock. As the relative cool of the evening settled over the cove, and the gigantic pile of ships began to wink with lamplight and candlelight, like a thousand sparkling fireflies gathering in the gloom, Rafael solemnly squired his granddaughter out onto the deck. He kissed her at the top of the gangplank, then, fixing her aspiring swains with a jaundiced glance, he announced loudly that he expected her to return in two hours.

Esmeralda made a face at her curfew, but she didn't say anything. Jack and Christophe both nodded and bowed solemnly, assuring Don Rafael that they would return her, or die trying (at least, that was the way Christophe expressed it).

As she descended the gangplank, Esmeralda looked beautiful in a gown of silvery gray silk. It was very modestly cut, and she wore no jewelry save for small silver earrings. "I didn't want to dress up much," she confided, breathlessly. "I mean, I don't want to attract attention."

Jack thought that Esmeralda would attract men's attention dressed in old sacks, but he nodded solemnly, understanding what she meant.

The three made their way through the crazily winding, often uneven halls that connected the stacked vessels of Shipwreck City, until they reached The Drunken Lady. When they got there, they were able to quickly claim a table, because they were there early, and ordered wine. Esmeralda looked around with unabashed curiosity as she sipped her drink. Jack and Christophe, abstemious because of their sacred charge, confined themselves to wine, and

introduced her to several of the pirate captains they knew. Knowing that she was the granddaughter of a respected and feared Pirate Lord, everyone they introduced her to was on his best behavior.

After they'd finished their glass of wine, Jack introduced Esmeralda to Steve and Marie. The two ladies seemed to hit it off immediately, and went off to another table to chat privately and have another glass of wine. They were still talking when the evening's regular contingent of buccaneers came shuffling, peg-legging, or striding in. Steve, in order to give his wife a night off, had hired a lad to wait on the tables. The taproom's temperature quickly rose, and Steve had to open the windows in the hopes of letting in a breeze.

Jack and Christophe watched Esmeralda talking to Marie, fanning first herself, then the other woman, both of them laughing and chattering. "She's having a good time," Jack said, smiling to see his friend enjoying herself.

"*Oui*, but I could show her a better one, *mon ami*," Christophe said, gazing at the two women. Catching Esmeralda's eye, he ostentatiously raised his glass in a toast to, first, her, then to Marie. Both ladies blushed. "I could show both of them a better time," he added, licking his lips beneath his rakish moustache. "*Mon Dieu*, to have a double armful of them in my bed!"

Jack blinked at him, then realized what he was saying, and was horrified to feel his face grow hot. Quickly, he bent over to tug up his freshly cleaned and oiled right boot. It wasn't as though he hadn't tumbled more than one wench at a time. He had. There were those twins in Tortuga…he half smiled at the memory.

But Esmeralda and Marie…they were different. They were *ladies*. Thinking of them that way didn't seem right.

Jack glanced away from Christophe as he slowly straightened back up, hoping the color in his cheeks would be attributed to bending over. As he looked toward the back of the room, the part that overhung Shipwreck Cove, his

attention was caught by a high-pitched, quavering voice, drunkenly babbling.

"—and they're all afraid, afraid of the devil! Old One Tooth Tommy, he's the only one with the guts to tell what he saw that night! The night the devil drowned the *Cobra*!"

Jack frowned. *The* Cobra…*that was Barbossa's ship….*

He glanced over at Christophe, who had leaned over to talk to someone he knew at the next table. Esmeralda and Marie were still chatting over in the corner, under Steve's watchful eye.

Jack waved quickly at Christophe and stood up. "Be right back," he mouthed. Christophe gave him a half wave in acknowledgment.

Moving through the throng, Jack approached the big windows that stood wide open, giving a view of the cove. The moon was rising over the black water, and it touched the edges of the ripples with vermeil.

He found the man who was talking by following the sound of his high-pitched voice. He sat all alone at a table in the otherwise crowded tavern, obviously well into his cups, an ancient bald pirate, thin as a spar, with corded muscles standing out on skinny arms. His face was weathered and so wrinkled his features looked like an old treasure map. Dressed in clothing that was battered and torn even for Shipwreck City, he had a bottle of rum in front of him, but no glass. As Jack approached, he broke off his rant, then clutched his bottle to his chest. He also shut his mouth, eyeing Jack warily.

Jack essayed his most disarming grin. "Hallo, er, Tommy. You *are* Tommy, aren't you?"

The old pirate nodded, looking Jack up and down, dubiously. He cocked his head at his visitor. "They call me One Tooth Tommy. 'Cause o' me tooth." He opened his mouth to demonstrate, pointing. There it was, surprisingly clean and white, looking like a slab of marble embedded in a cavern of rose quartz.

Jack nodded. “Ah, an apt sobriquet,” he said. “May I join you for a moment?”

One Tooth Tommy clutched his bottle harder. “Ain’t gonna share,” he warned. “But ye can sit down.” He peered nearsightedly at Jack, then his expression brightened. “I know who ye be! I seen ye walking with him, the one what keeps the Code. Right?” He nodded to himself, then took a swig of rum. “Look like him, ye do. They say he wants justice for us what was aboard *Cobra*. Can I trust ye?”

Jack nodded. “Of course you can. I heard Captain Barbossa’s story.”

“The Keeper’s the only one trying to find out who sent the *Cobra* to Davy Jones’s locker, along with a lot of good men,” One Tooth Tommy said. “Cap’n Barbossa said it’s against the Code for pirates to sneak up on other pirates, then shoot ’em in the back.” He swigged from the rum again. “Had a brass bow chaser, he did. Seen its like before, in India. Them Hindoos made it all fancy with carvings.”

Jack leaned forward, conspiratorially. “Who is ‘he’?”

“Why, he’s the devil. He’s magic, he is,” Tommy assured him. “I seen him that night, on his ship. Lookin’ for survivors, he was, in the water. Not to save ’em. To kill ’em. The smoke was so thick, it hid us. Only reason we survived. ’Cause when the devil wants ye, he takes ye. Right?”

“Absolutely,” Jack said.

“Saw him last night, too,” announced One Tooth Tommy, meditatively, sucking on his tooth. “He’s here.”

Jack stared at him in shock, then recalled that the old pirate was very, very drunk. “Here? In Shipwreck Cove, mate?”

“Aye, here. Saw him on the deck of his ship. ’Twas him all right. But he…”

One Tooth Tommy broke off, cringing back, his eyes fixed on something past Jack’s shoulder.

Jack turned around, to find Christophe approaching, clearly impatient. “There you are!” he said. “Esmeralda has

finished her woman-talk, and asks that we take her outside for some air, Jacques." He stopped, eyeing Jack and the old pirate. "But, of course, if you are busy, I could take her myself…."

"No," Jack said, hastily, rising. "I was just going. Nice to meet you…Tom," he said, over his shoulder, as he followed his friend back into the melee that was now the taproom of The Drunken Lady. The old pirate, bottle still clutched to his chest, gave him a tentative wave.

Jack was so intrigued by what the old pirate had said that he decided he'd try to talk to Tommy again, after he and Christophe took Esmeralda back to *Venganza* by the appointed hour. Accordingly, he went back to The Drunken Lady later, alone, to search for him, but Tommy wasn't anywhere to be found, and nobody recalled seeing him leave.

He looked for One Tooth Tommy the next day, also to no avail. And the next night. Nobody remembered seeing him around.

Jack began to wonder whether the old pirate had managed to get a berth on a ship that had departed. Pirate vessels went in and out of Shipwreck Cove nearly every day.

The next night, after spending the morning with Christophe and Esmeralda, and watching Christophe's ever-bolder advances, a tense, frustrated Jack went looking for a wench he knew, a lively brunette by the name of Melinda. He found her in one of the rowdier taverns, The Parrot's Perch, on the arm of another pirate, a short, extraordinarily ugly man with a balding pate, hideous teeth, a pronounced paunch, and an evil leer. Melinda was looking very fine indeed that night, wearing her bottle-green gown, with her brown hair done up, baring her shoulders. Jack saw her through the crowd, and began edging his way through it to reach her.

He stepped on a few toes, and got some dirty looks, but finally managed to get close to her. Her short, unappealing

escort was grinning at her and running his grimy fingers down the sleeve of her gown. Jack was sure he glimpsed drool slicking the man's chin. He shuddered, and raised his voice, so she could hear him over the drunken din. "Melinda, love!" he exclaimed. "Let me take you away from all this."

She turned at the sound of his voice, smiling broadly. One of her front teeth was missing, but Jack thought that gave her a piquant air. He leaned close enough to see the freckles that sprinkled her nose and cheeks, and gestured at her inebriated admirer. "Ditch him, darling. Come away with me."

Melinda regarded him speculatively, while absentmindedly fending off the groping hands of her companion. She was clearly tempted. Jack flashed his most engaging, roguish smile at her, and she shook her head. "Darling, there's nothing I'd like better," she slapped a filthy hand away from her bosom, "but I knows ye, Jacky, ye know I does. And a workin' girl's gotta eat and pay the rent. Let me see the color of your coin, Jacky."

Jack nodded, unfazed. Business was business, after all. Fumbling some coins from his purse, he showed them to her, but curled his fingers over his palm when Melinda reached for them.

She gave him a coquettish smile and winked one pretty brown eye. "That'll do, love. And you, um, Pintel. Let go of me," she said, addressing her would-be escort. When the man protested in a slurred voice, not relinquishing his grasp, Melinda's knee flashed swiftly upward. The short pirate's knees sagged and he gasped. He let go.

"Next time, when a lady says 'let go,' Pintel," Melinda said, her pert nose in the air, "perhaps you'll listen."

Swishing her skirt, she stepped over to Jack and took his arm. "Let's go somewhere quieter, Jacky," she suggested.

"My very thought," he replied.

Together they traversed the corridors and warren-like passageways of Shipwreck City, until they were once more

at the level of the cove. It was much quieter outside, and they began walking along the docks, looking for an unoccupied, dark place to conduct their business.

They'd walked nearly around the little island that held Shipwreck City, all of it lined with layers of docks, passing *Troubadour* and *Venganza* midway. Finally, just as Jack was about to suggest going back to her room, he spied a place that would serve—a section of dock that lay in deep shadow cast by the nearly full moon. He steered Melinda toward it, and had just begun to strip off his coat to lay it down on the splinter-infested wood, when he heard a gasp from his companion that grew so shrill it was almost a scream.

Whirling around, he saw her staring, eyes wide, at the water. "What is it?" he demanded.

Wordlessly, she pointed, her hand shaking.

Jack looked, following the angle of her finger, and saw, in the moonlight, what was floating a few feet below them. He stared, silent with shock, hearing the gentle lapping of the water—and also the soft, sodden thumps the left leg made as it drifted back and forth against the pilings.

"Tommy," Jack whispered. "It has to be." The clothes were right, and the man had been bald. But he couldn't be certain. The dead flesh was the color of seawater, and bloated….

Seeing also that the crabs had been at the body, Jack felt his stomach lurch. He'd seen dozens, possibly hundreds of dead men—and some of them he'd known. But most of them had been killed in battle, not drowned.

Hastily, he handed Melinda the coins she hadn't yet earned, and ordered her to go back to *Troubadour*'s berth, call out to the crewman on watch for Captain Teague, then lead the Pirate Lord back here immediately. "And then go straight home," he said.

"All right," she agreed, her voice a bit unsteady, as she made the coins disappear. "But what are you going to do, Jacky?"

“I’m going to fish the poor old sot out,” Jack said, grimly, removing his waistcoat and looking around for a boat hook. “Hurry up now, love. You don’t want to see this.”

“You’re right,” she said, and, gulping audibly, snatched up her skirts and started off at a trot.

Jack was thoroughly wet by the time he’d managed to get a rope around the corpse and haul it up onto the dock. Clouds had moved in, and he had to conclude the last part of the nasty business in near-darkness.

Just as he finished turning the body over so it lay face-up, he heard voices, and saw the swaying lights of lanterns approaching. Jack stood up, dripping, to find a very aggravated Captain Teague and several of his men approaching.

“What’s going on here, boy?” the Keeper demanded, impatiently. “What have you done now, Jacky?”

Jack forced himself not to react to the way Teague said that hated nickname. It wasn’t anything new for the Keeper to blame him for whatever went wrong.

“Found a body in the cove,” he replied, shortly. “One of Barbossa’s crew. His name was Tommy. One Tooth Tommy.” He saw the anger in Teague’s eyes, and forced his voice to stay level. “Step over here, please, Captain,” he said, moving out of earshot of Teague’s men.

Still angry, but beginning to be puzzled, Teague followed, motioning to his men for privacy. Jack gestured at the body and lowered his voice. “I met him two nights ago, in The Drunken Lady. The poor old sot was bloody drunk off his arse, and raving.”

Teague started to speak, and Jack held up a hand to forestall him. “What he was going on about, Captain, was that during the battle, he’d seen the captain of the rogue ship that sank the *Cobra*. Said their attacker had a fancy brass bow chaser. But just before he clammed up, he told me he’d seen ‘the devil’—that’s what he called the captain

—*here*. In the cove. Said he was standing on the deck of his ship, three nights ago."

The Keeper had opened his mouth, doubtless to say something scathing, but by the time Jack finished speaking, he shut it, then stood staring down at the body, obviously mulling over what he'd been told.

Finally Teague looked back up. "I've seen him before this. I spoke to all of Barbossa's surviving crew. Tommy was drunk when he spoke to me. Barbossa said he'd been drunk ever since the *Cobra* sank. He was probably drunk, and he fell in. Or maybe he was passed out on the dock, and rolled in. Did you examine him?"

"No," said Jack, then added the obvious, dryly. "It's dark, Captain. But I will, if you'll hold the lantern."

Teague nodded brusquely, and held his lantern to illuminate the corpse. He gestured, and his men rejoined them. In the light of the three lanterns, Jack knelt back down on the dock, and, not allowing himself to think about what he was doing, began examining the body, rolling it back and forth along the dock to see all sides. His stomach lurched again at the spongy feel of the cold flesh, and the squishing sounds it made, but he persisted, determined to discover what had happened. He even opened old Tommy's shirt to check his chest and back for bruises or stab wounds, though he drew the line at removing the ragged britches.

Finally, after ten minutes or so of close examination, Jack sat back on his heels. "As far as I can tell, he wasn't struck, stabbed, or shot. No wounds on the body."

Teague nodded, as if satisfied that his conclusion had been borne out. "No foul play," he said.

"I'm not so sure," Jack said. "There could still have been foul play, Captain. All it would have taken was for someone to get him so drunk that he passed out, then drop him into the cove. That would be murder."

Teague sighed, but Jack's point was so obvious, he didn't say anything. Still, it was clear that the Pirate Lord

had made up his mind about One Tooth Tommy's demise. "How long do you think he's been dead?" he asked. "More than a day, that's clear."

Jack stood up. He was soaking, and even in the warm Caribbean evening, a breeze had sprung up. Shivering a little, he walked over to retrieve his effects. "I think he was killed not long after he spoke to me," he said, quietly, pulling on his waistcoat, then his coat. "I think someone else heard what he was saying, and felt threatened."

Teague walked over to stand beside him, and also lowered his voice. "Who was in The Drunken Lady? Who might have heard what he was saying?"

Jack shrugged. "I heard him from half the taproom away, crowded as it was. Anyone might have heard him ranting."

Captain Teague blew out his breath unhappily, but said no more. Instead he gestured to his men, and they picked up the body. Jack and Teague picked up lanterns to light their way, and the little party started back toward *Troubadour* in silence.

Jack walked along, holding his coat closed across his chest, remembering Tommy's insistence that the man he'd seen was "the devil." Every so often, he shivered.

Jack blinked, realizing that the sun had moved while he'd been lost in memories. His brief shore leave was over. He sighed, feeling loneliness wash over him like a wave. If only Esmeralda were here, to share this beautiful beach with him….

He wondered what she was doing at the moment. So far, he hadn't seen a single ship during their passage to the Bahamas, and, frankly, he hoped that would continue. But if a ship appeared in the circle of his spyglass, he hoped it would be *Venganza*. Jack smiled slightly. *She'd have a lot*

more trouble catching the Wench *than she did* Fair Wind, he thought.

Rising to his feet, he executed another perfect dive, then began swimming back to shore, and his clothes.

The remainder of the *Wicked Wench*'s first voyage under Jack Sparrow's command passed without incident. Jack learned every nuance of his ship's rigging, how she moved, how best to take advantage of the wind. He drilled and pushed his crew to speed up the time they took responding to orders, and was rewarded with greater efficiency.

Chamba continued to perform well as a new hand. His English improved, as he listened to the English-speaking crewmembers and emulated them. Robby Greene told Jack one night, laughing, that the lad had said, "Savvy?" in a perfect imitation of the way his captain did. He also told Jack that Chamba had asked Robby to teach him to read, and that Robby had begun his lessons. "He's quick, Jack," the first mate said. "He could make an officer, if only…" he trailed off, and shrugged, knowing that Jack would follow his meaning.

"He could go on the account," Jack said. "Pirates recognize a good man, and they'll elect anyone captain that can bring them prizes. Pirates don't care about the color of a man's skin."

Robby shook his head. "Don't you dare suggest that to him, Jack," he said. "If he works hard, he can become a quartermaster, or a mate, perhaps. That's better than swinging from a gallows."

"You're right," Jack agreed, with a sigh.

The *Wench* sailed north, along the coast of the American colonies, gliding on the Gulf Stream. As before, Jack brought her across the Atlantic, navigating with admirable precision. She unloaded her cargo in Liverpool, then picked up another cargo, and departed, bound for Calabar. Jack was glad that

the EITC dockworkers had wasted no time loading his new cargo. He'd checked the days their voyage had taken, and realized he was actually running close to the record for sailing the Triangle. His *Wench* was indeed fast!

Then they were on the move again, sailing south, past France, past Spain, past Portugal. They took on fresh water in Gibraltar, and then they were hastening south, down the coast of Africa, curving around the bulge, then turning almost due east.

They reached Calabar on a Thursday, not long before the rainy season was due to begin, and tied up at the EITC dock. Jack checked the date, and sighed. *Missed equaling the record by two bloody days! If we hadn't diverted to St. Jago, we'd likely have beaten it. Still, not too shabby for a first voyage as a new captain. Not too shabby at all….*

Jack had scarcely checked the moorings on the *Wench* before crowds were gathering on the dock. Voices were calling out to the ship, shouting that he'd almost beaten the Triangle record. Hearing them, Jack went to the railing, and waved modestly. The dockworkers cheered.

After they dropped the gangplank, a short, ginger-haired man came scurrying up, introducing himself as Eugene Parker, the new EITC portmaster. Portmaster Parker told Jack that his predecessor, Benjamin Blount, had fled Calabar in the middle of the night after a captain had discovered that the provisions he'd sent had been infested and the meat rotten. Hearing this, Jack shook his head in wonder and made appropriately shocked comments.

He was still standing on the weather deck, talking to the portmaster, when a slightly built, dark-haired man called out from the bottom of the gangplank, "Permission to come aboard, Captain Sparrow?"

Jack looked down at the man, and nodded. "Who's the Scotsman?" he asked the portmaster.

Mr. Parker's broad, good-humored countenance tightened, but he said, evenly, "That's Mr. Beckett's

assistant, Ian Mercer.”

By that time, the new arrival had joined them. Jack nodded cordially to him. “Good afternoon, Mr. Mercer.”

Mercer gave him a curt nod back. “Good afternoon, Captain Sparrow.”

Jack noticed Mercer didn’t extend his hand. Looking into the man’s eyes, Jack was just as glad. Mercer’s eyes were flat and cold…the eyes of a man who could kill without a thought, without even a reason, and never think twice about it. Jack had met a few pirates who were killers; most were madmen, dangerous to their crews, and to everyone they encountered. But even worse than the madmen, Jack had found, were the killers who had eyes like Mercer.

And this man works for Mr. Beckett? he thought, dismayed, but careful not to let it show. *Why would he need a man like this working for him? What’s Beckett up to, that he has a killer as his assistant?*

Jack cleared his throat. “So how is Mr. Beckett keeping, Mr. Mercer? Well, I hope?”

“He’s fine, Captain Sparrow,” Mercer said, shortly, obviously not interested in exchanging pleasantries. “Mr. Beckett sent me down here to ask you to come to his office right away. There’s someone he wants you to meet.”

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Chapter Seven
Lost and Found

Jack blinked at Cutler Beckett's new "assistant," then glanced around at the *Wicked Wench*, visually checking her status. The ship was safely secured, but there were things he needed to do, such as arrange for his cargo to be unloaded, and inform the crew about shore leave. But this sounded urgent….

"I'll come directly," he said. "Just let me speak to my first mate to let him know about this."

Mercer's face never changed. He nodded, grudgingly.

Jack was back in moments, and the two men set off on foot, down the gangplank, along the docks, then to the rutted mud of the streets, heading up the hill toward the better section of town. Brushing uselessly at a spot on his coat, Jack cleared his throat. "I hope Mr. Beckett will understand that I haven't had a chance to…freshen up."

"That's been taken care of," Mercer said, flatly. The only distinctive thing about his voice was his Scottish accent. Otherwise, his voice was toneless, lacking any emotion.

Jack glanced at Mercer out of the corner of his eye. He was fairly sure the man was carrying a brace of pistols beneath his coat. The garment itself was cut so as to conceal them, but Jack knew where to look. He'd carried pistols slung beneath his arms himself, a few times.

Who is this man that doesn't even take a mile walk in broad daylight on a public street without going out armed? What kind of trouble can he be expecting? And WHY does Mr. Beckett need a man like this to handle things for him?

Mercer strode along quickly, forcing Jack to lengthen his stride. Even though Mercer was shorter than Jack, Jack's gait was perforce unsteady, since it had been many weeks since he'd been on dry land. By the time they'd climbed the hill to Beckett's home (Jack was surprised by their destination; he'd been expecting to be taken to the EITC office) his "land legs" were working again.

Mercer led him inside the beautifully appointed town house, stopping in the foyer. "Mistress Goodwright?" he called out.

A plumpish middle-aged woman appeared, wearing a white fichu crossed over the bosom, and the matching cap worn by married ladies in England. "Yes, Mr. Mercer?" She glanced at Jack. "Is this the young man we're expecting to lunch with Mr. Beckett and His Lordship?"

"Yes, Mistress Goodwright," Mercer replied. "Please attend to him."

The housekeeper gave Jack an appraising glance, from his sun-faded old tricorne, to his battered buckled shoes. She then made a little "tch" with her tongue against her teeth, but didn't…quite…shake her head. "Very well, please come with me, Mister…er, Sparrow, is it?

Jack swept off his battered tricorne, bowed slightly, and smiled. "*Captain* Jack Sparrow, madam."

As she took in his smile, Mistress Goodwright's plump cheeks turned even redder; smiling back, she actually dropped a little curtsy. "La, and aren't you the one," she said, to no one in particular. "Come with me, please, Captain Sparrow."

Jack followed her down the hallway, through the family living quarters, to the back of the house that seemed to be part of the laundry area. A portion of it had been cleared of sheets and clothes, and there stood a cast-iron tub full of water, a big ewer that was likewise filled, a cake of soap, a razor, and several large towels. A comb and brush waited on the washstand. Hanging from a clothes tree was a bright

blue coat, a canary colored waistcoat, an ivory lawn shirt, and a pair of fawn-colored britches. Creamy white stockings were draped alongside the britches. All of the clothes appeared to be new. “We didn’t do the shoes,” Mistress Goodwright said, regretfully, eyeing Jack’s battered shoes. “But you can brush ’em off, a bit, maybe.”

Jack stopped in the doorway. “What’s all this?” he asked, surprised. “New clothes? For me?”

“You’re to meet His Lordship, Viscount Penwallow,” Mistress Goodwright said, bustling around. “Methinks we’ve got a hat that will fit…one of footman’s old ones, perhaps. I’ll see about it, while you’re having your bath. Hurry up, it’s almost time to serve luncheon.”

Jack was mesmerized by the water in the iron tub. Reaching out, he touched it, finding it tepid. “What’s this for?” he asked.

“La, lad!” Mistress Goodwright giggled, “’Tis for you! Very particular, Mr. Beckett is, ’bout his hygiene. That is his own tub! He ordered us to haul it down here and fill it for you, Captain.”

Jack frowned, confused. “What does Mr. Beckett want me to do with it?”

She giggled harder. “I know, I know…outlandish idea, isn’t it? But ’tis becoming the fashion among some of the gentry, they say. At least once a month, they takes off all their clothes, and they SITS in those ‘bathtubs’ and they washes themselves. All over. Mr. Beckett says the Romans did it all the time.”

“No wonder their empire fell,” Jack muttered. Turning back to Mistress Goodwright, he drew himself up and fixed her with a reproving glare. “Madam, I am clean.” Catching sight of his hands, he tucked them behind him and amended, “Well, mostly.”

Silently, the goodwife shook her head, pursing her lips.

“I’ll have you know I went for a nice long swim on a lovely beach, not much more than three months ago,” Jack

said, indignantly.

Mistress Goodwright stepped forward, biting her lip. She swallowed. “Mr. Beckett told me that if you said no, I was to tell him and he’d instruct Mr. Mercer to see that you did it,” she whispered.

Jack moved forward and stared down at the nervous little housekeeper. His voice, when finally spoke, was very soft and cold. “*Did* he now? That’s…interesting.”

The thought of having Mercer and some footman ripping his clothes off and throwing him into that tub was not only unappealing, it was terrifying. For a moment, Jack was tempted to say to hell with the whole bloody thing and go back to his ship. Still…he worked for Beckett…and Beckett had made him a captain…and there was the *Wicked Wench*....

He hesitated.

Mistress Goodwright nodded fearfully. “Oh, *please*, Captain Sparrow. Mr. Beckett ordered me to see that you bathed. He’ll be powerful angry with me if you don’t. He’s always so particular about things when Lord Penwallow comes to visit.”

The goodwife’s eyes were suspiciously bright, and her plea was obviously heartfelt. Looking down at the clear water, Jack shrugged. *How bad can it be?* “Oh, very well,” he grumped. “But I’m sure it’s unhealthy. I’ll probably catch me death.”

“*Thank* you, Captain Sparrow!” Mistress Goodwright hesitated in the doorway as Jack placed his tricorne on a row of hooks, then stepped out of his shoes. He took off his coat, then looked back up at her, wondering why she was still there. “Um…” she cast her eyes down modestly as she blushed, “Captain Sparrow, would you like me to…scrub your back?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Madam,” he said, patiently, “I thought time was of the essence?”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, of course,” she moved backward.

“And close that door, if you please,” Jack ordered, shrugging out of his waistcoat.

The door swung closed…but he didn’t hear it click. Jack began unbuttoning his shirt. “All the way, Mistress Goodwright,” he said.

The door clicked shut.

The bath wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d thought it might be. He’d never washed with anything other than a chip of laundry soap, but this soap smelled like herbs and flowers. Jack even washed his hair, dunking his head to rinse. When he climbed out, he was surprised to see how dark the water had turned.

Maybe I should try to swim more often, he thought, toweling off.

After he’d shaved, and tied his hair back, he turned his attention to the new clothes. They fit perfectly. Jack wiped the dust off his shoes with one of the towels, buffed the buckles for a moment, then pulled them on. He opened the door to the other room to find Mercer and Mistress Goodwright waiting. She handed him a plain black tricorne. “Here, Captain Sparrow. You look very…distinguished.”

“Thank you,” Jack said. The new clothes were stiff against his skin, but he had to admit they felt good. He wished he had a mirror. “About my old clothes—”

“We’ll take care of burning them for you,” Mercer said. “Come along now.”

Jack halted. “I don’t think so, mate. I’m rather partial to my clothes. I spent good coin on them, money I earned by the sweat of my brow. I want them returned to my ship, or put in a parcel so I can carry them back myself.”

Mercer’s look clearly expressed his irritation, but Jack stood firm.

“Very well,” Mercer said, and even through the man’s flat tones, Jack could tell this small concession cost him. This was a man people did not say “no” to with impunity.

“Mistress Goodwright will see that your clothes are waiting for you.”

Jack glanced at the housekeeper and she nodded reassuringly at him.

He headed for Mercer. “Let’s go, then.”

Luncheon, it turned out, was to be served upstairs, in Beckett’s library. Jack stood with Mercer outside the door while the assistant knocked on it. “Mr. Beckett, Captain Sparrow is here.”

“Please send him in,” responded a familiar voice.

Jack entered the library, and thought that he had never seen so many books in one place before. He would have loved to look around, but instead went straight over to the long table in the center of the room, where Cutler Beckett was seated with a heavy-bellied man who smelled strongly of expensive perfume. No doubt this was the Lord Penwallow that had been mentioned. The older man wore an elaborate powdered wig and elegant brocaded coat in marked contrast to Cutler Beckett’s subdued business attire. His Lordship’s clothing, Jack realized, probably cost more than an EITC captain made in half a year.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Beckett,” Jack said, wondering whether he should bow or offer to shake hands. Deciding to play it safe, he gave a respectful bow.

“Ah, Captain Sparrow!” Cutler Beckett said, in his upper-class accent. “How nice that you could join us for luncheon. Allow me to introduce my houseguest. This is Viscount, Lord Reginald Marmaduke Bracegirdle-Penwallow, the EITC’s Director of African Affairs.”

Jack wished that someone had warned him beforehand about that name. He kept his features pleasant, but it was a close thing for a moment. Promising himself a good laugh the moment he was alone, he bowed, rather more deeply than he had to Beckett, to Penwallow. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Penwallow.”

Lord Penwallow smiled affably. “Thank you, Captain Sparrow, and I must say the pleasure is all mine. It’s an honor to meet the captain who so nearly broke the record for sailing the Triangle—and on the vessel’s maiden voyage as an EITC ship, too! Well done, well done, Captain Sparrow!”

Jack found himself rather liking Lord Penwallow.

After Jack was seated, and while they were exchanging small talk about the *Wicked Wench*, chatting about her cargo capacity and her top logged speed, Mistress Goodwright tapped on the door, then entered, followed by a string of maids and footmen, all of them carrying platters, bowls, and bottles. Jack, who hadn’t eaten since dawn, heard his stomach growl, and devoutly hoped no one else had heard it. He stared at the excess of delicate wineglasses, bone china, and polished sterling with dismay, then, glancing sideways at Cutler Beckett, resolved to follow his host’s lead in navigating these unknown intricacies of table etiquette. It wouldn’t do to commit some manner of egregious *faux pas* and embarrass Mr. Beckett.

The meal began with a delicious consommé, and a glass of port. Jack copied Beckett’s use of his soup spoon, enjoying the flavor, but all the while wondering why such a flavorful broth had been allowed to get cold, and was lacking any actual meat, vegetables, beans, or rice. Jack noticed that Mr. Beckett didn’t clink his spoon against the china, and made not even a trace of a slurp, so he carefully followed his lead. *The gentry don’t have much fun when they eat, do they? Maybe that’s why Mr. Beckett hardly ever smiles….*

The next course was a delicious white fish with a creamy sauce, accompanied by a delicate Chablis. Jack had eaten fish all his life, but never any so elegantly prepared and served. Now that he had to actually chew, he was careful to mimic Cutler Beckett and keep his lips together.

Jack sipped each wine carefully, politely refusing refills. He wanted to keep a clear head so he wouldn't make some kind of mistake. He was relieved to discover that the main course was filet of beef, with potatoes. The captain relaxed a bit; he'd certainly had meat and potatoes before. But he'd never had beef this tender. He chewed appreciatively—but carefully. Again there was a different wine, this time a rich Beaujolais.

When the servants cleared away his plate this time, Jack figured they were finished. He was just about to push back from the table, when suddenly there was a plate of raw greens, onions, and slivers of carrot resting before him. After a glance at Cutler Beckett's place setting for a cutlery check, he picked up the appropriate fork (he was down now to only two) and was soon crunching away manfully. How odd to eat vegetables that hadn't been cooked! But he had to admit, they tasted better than he would have imagined, due mostly to the dollop of dressing the footman had added to them after placing Jack's plate before him.

The last dish served was some kind of pudding, mixed up with cake, all of it topped with thick cream and a sweet liqueur. Jack had never eaten anything so sweet and rich in his life. He finished, then laid his fork down, wishing he dared lick the plate…but even pirates seldom did *that*—at least in public. The sweet sherry that had accompanied it wasn't to his taste, so he didn't finish his glass—another first. Using the damask serviette for the last time, Jack wiped his mouth, just as Beckett and Penwallow did. He found himself thinking that perhaps he'd invest in a few of these. They worked better than one's sleeve, and would be far easier to keep clean.

Conversation during the meal had mostly been carried on between Beckett and Penwallow, with Jack only having to briefly answer a question or two about his recent voyage. As the last of the servants left with the dirty dishes, Beckett turned to him, saying warmly, "Jack, it was truly a fortunate

coincidence that you arrived today, and could join us. I trust you enjoyed our modest repast?”

Jack nodded. “Oh, yes, Mr. Beckett. Thank you for the invitation.”

“Good! Jack, Lord Penwallow has an important delivery to be made to the plantation he recently purchased in New Avalon. I told him you were the very chap to transport it there for him.”

Jack nodded. “Certainly, Mr. Beckett. I’ll do my best to get it there in good time.” A sudden thought struck him. *He’s not talking about slaves, is he? I don’t transport slaves.*

Penwallow, too, was smiling and nodding. “I’m building a new plantation house, Captain Sparrow. I had everything shipped to me here in Calabar, so I could inspect it all personally before I had it sent on to its destination. I was worried that the imported window glass might have broken, but it was packed exceedingly well—just as I instructed.”

Jack relaxed and smiled. “Building materials? I’ll be happy to head right back out as soon as they’re loaded, and we’ve restocked. It’s almost time for the rainy season here in Africa, and I’ll be glad to get away before that begins.”

Penwallow nodded again. “Capital, Captain Sparrow!” He rubbed his beringed hands together, obviously in an excellent mood. “This load will need your personal supervision, Captain. Some of the objects I’ve acquired are one-of-a-kind pieces of art, and all of them would be difficult to replace. For example, there will be two types of brick, the regular brick for the sides and rear of the house, and the ornamental brick for the front. Wait until you see the rose color of it. It’s splendid! And of course the rare woods for the floors.”

“Don’t forget the more prosaic stuff, my lord,” Cutler Beckett said, still smiling. “Nails, and hinges, and fittings for the doors. Lath and plaster and mortar. And boards, of course, both finished and rough-planed. Not to mention the tools for the workers.”

“Cutler, my boy, you’re forgetting my Italian marble tiles for the pavement, plus the fountain I purchased in Venice!” the EITC director said, beaming. “It’s going to be a showplace, I declare!”

“You’ll be moving there, Lord Penwallow?” Jack asked. “To New Avalon? You and your family?”

“We’ll certainly be visiting there,” the portly man said. “Whether m’wife Hortense will agree to make it her year-round home remains to be seen. As for m’self, I spend most of my time traveling for the EITC.”

“New Avalon is lovely, much of the year,” Jack said. “Summers are much hotter than in England, of course.”

“I’ve been there, but Lady Hortense hasn’t,” Penwallow said. “Still, the climate will be good for her joints, methinks. She suffers terrible with rheumatics every winter.”

Jack nodded. “If the cold bothers her, then living in New Avalon should definitely help. Do you have children, Lord Penwallow? It sounds as though you’re building a large plantation house.”

“Yes, two,” Penwallow said. “But our daughter Anna is married, and no doubt she’ll stay in England, though I hope she might visit and bring the children. Our son Frederick will probably prefer to remain in Surrey. He wouldn’t want to miss the season at court.”

“Ah,” Jack said, nodding sagely, as though he met people who had relatives at court every day.

“I have their miniatures; would you care to see?”

“I’d like that very much, my lord.”

“Here we go…I always carry them…” Lord Penwallow brought out the painted ivory miniatures in their little gold frames and handed them over.

Jack studied them, listening as the old man rambled on about his family, particularly his son. Frederick Penwallow, it seemed, was the best rider to hounds in all of Surrey, could dance every dance at every fancy ball, hold his liquor with the best of them, and had never lost a game of chance. It

was clear that the young man was the apple of his father's eye, and something of a rake, Jack concluded, studying the pictured face. The miniature showed a young man of about Jack's age, with dark, curled hair, and dark eyes with a hint of mischief in them, presuming that the artist had rendered a good likeness.

"A handsome young gentleman," Jack said, handing back the picture. "Though for a young man of such high birth, I'm surprised he doesn't favor powdered wigs."

Lord Penwallow laughed, delighted. "That's Frederick's own hair!" he said. "Thick and curly as any fine wig, it is. Just between you and me, Captain Sparrow, he's a bit vain about it."

Jack widened his eyes appropriately. "A fine head of hair indeed," he said. "I'll take odds Frederick is considered quite a catch, eh? All the young ladies setting their caps for him."

Penwallow gave Jack and Cutler Beckett a triumphant glance, then lowered his voice. "I was told by a reliable source in the Privy Council that Frederick has been referred to as England's most eligible bachelor!"

"I knew it," Jack exclaimed. "Didn't I say it? *All* the young ladies!"

By the time the three men parted company later that afternoon, Jack knew a great deal about his lordship's family, and Lord Penwallow was convinced that Captain Jack Sparrow was not only a notable ship captain, but a young man of great taste and discernment.

He positively beamed at Jack as they bade each other farewell.

Jack headed back down the street, carrying his old clothes in the sack Mistress Goodwright had handed to him at the door, wondering what it would be like to live in Mr. Beckett's world—or even Lord Penwallow's world. *I suppose you get used to wearing fancy clothes all the time, and eating fancy food, food that sure beats burgoo*, he admitted, recalling that memorable luncheon.

But…everything's so bloody complicated for the gentry, it seems! You'd have to be planning and figuring and doing every moment of every day. When would you have time to enjoy yourself? No, I'll take a good ship and a following wind any day, he concluded.

But…wouldn't it be great if the good ship were his *own* ship?

Jack's strides slowed, and his expression grew thoughtful. *How could I ever buy a ship of my own?* he wondered. He'd never been one to save money. But perhaps it was time to change that. If he had a ship of his own… perhaps even the *Wicked Wench*, say, *he* would be the one in charge. He'd give the orders on land, as well as at sea. And he wouldn't have to worry about pleasing a supervisor, or a company. He'd only have to please himself.

He'd wanted for so long to be captain of his own vessel. What if the ship he commanded actually *belonged* to him?

Jack walked on down toward the docks, deep in thought.

By dint of pushing himself and his crew, Jack managed to get the *Wicked Wench* loaded and away from Calabar before the rainy season set in. With Lord Penwallow's precious cargo safely stored and padded and fastened in place, he set sail on the first leg of the Triangle, glad to be back at sea. He'd found a new cabin boy in Calabar, and promoted Chamba to ordinary seaman, studying for able seaman. The lad was likely to make it before Etienne de Ver and Lucius Featherstone, because he was quick with his hands, intelligent, and focused—unlike the quarrelsome Frenchman and Englishman, who tended to get into one of their endless arguments and wind up not paying attention to what they were doing.

It didn't help that Chamba, now that his English was better, proved to have a mischievous gift for getting the two bickering crewmen going. With studied innocence, he'd ask

a simple question, and then they'd be off—sometimes for an hour, or until someone ordered them to pipe down.

Jack had heard about the former slave's mischief from Robby, but one sunny spring morning, he had the opportunity to observe it for himself. The *Wicked Wench* was forging along at better than seven knots, making good time, all plain sail set. The ordinary seamen were practicing their knot tying on the weather deck. The captain was relaxing after a brisk bout of fencing with Robby, leaning against the rail, one foot up on the carriage of one of his two six-pounders.

"Mr. de Ver?" Chamba held up a perfect bowline triumphantly, and then began unknotting it for his next effort. "May I ask you a question?"

Etienne de Ver glanced up. "But of course, Chamba. What is it?"

Chamba widened his eyes with studied innocence. "Mr. Greene, he been tellin' me 'bout some history that happened, oh, 'bout three hundred years ago. He said you French folk had a lady warrior, and she rode a white horse. She dressed up in armor and fought battles. I said that hard to believe. He said it be true. Is it?"

The Frenchman nodded. "Oh, yes, it is true. He was speaking of Jeanne d'Arc, you would say Joan of Arc, the holy martyr. She was a peasant maid who heard the divine voices of the angels telling her to lead the armies of the King."

"And she fought in battles?"

"Yes, she fought in battles—" de Ver glanced at Featherstone, assiduously tying knots not a dozen feet away, and pretending he wasn't listening, "against the British invaders. She defeated them! The British army defeated by a peasant girl! But then she was betrayed and sold to the British. They were angry that she had made them look so bad on the field of honor, so they tried her in a…what do you call it…a *sham* trial, then they tied to her a

stake and they burned her. They burned a holy maiden. Only the British, eh?”

Featherstone growled audibly. “She was a damned *Popish* heretic, Chamba, make no mistake. Only the French would allow a slip of a girl to lead them into battle. Hah! But I’ll give her this, at least *she* had courage!” He leaned forward confidingly. “Chamba, did you know that the French army is the only one that ever got their armpits sunburnt?” Lucius burst into loud guffaws at his wit, slapping his knees.

Chamba looked confused, until Featherstone, who was bare to the waist, as were most of the crew that warm day, raised his arms in a posture of surrender, then pointed to his darkly thatched underarm, and then straight up, illustrating how the sun illuminated that usually covered spot. The lad’s eyes grew wider, and then his teeth flashed on a grin. “Oooh, Mr. Featherstone, you funny!”

Etienne de Ver bristled. “At least in *my* country the roads are not paved with your pitiful excuses for puddings! *We* can cook!”

“Cook? Don’t make me laugh! Frogs legs, snails, and offal we wouldn’t feed to pigs!”

Jack, who by then had heard enough, stood up. “Belay that,” he snapped, then ordered both of them aloft to check for any sign of the Caribbees. He knew the islands wouldn’t be visible, but his ears needed a rest.

Jack then beckoned Chamba over and fixed him with a stern look. “You’ve gotten really good at that, haven’t you, lad?”

Chamba was the picture of innocence. “Oh, yes, Cap’n, I’m getting the hang of these knots, you bet! Yessir!”

Jack sighed. “I wasn’t talking about the knots, Chamba, and you bloody well know it. I was talking about Etienne and Lucius. You did that on purpose.”

Chamba gave him a “what, little old me?” look, but in the face of Jack’s irritation, he dropped his eyes, and his shoulders slumped. “I was just havin’ a bit of fun, Cap’n.”

Jack nodded. “So I saw. Tell you what, lad. Next time you feel like that, you go find that scurvy looking tomcat you and Robby sneaked aboard, and pull its tail till it yowls.”

Chamba looked genuinely startled. “Cap’n Sparrow! I *like* Henry Morgan!”

“Don’t you like Etienne and Lucius? They’re your shipmates, right?”

“Well, sure, Cap’n. I was just…” Chamba trailed off, looking thoughtful.

“Ah,” Jack said, with satisfaction. “The light has dawned, has it?”

Chamba looked down at his bare feet. “Yes, sir,” he said, softly.

Jack nodded, and sent him back to his knots.

When they reached New Avalon, Jack supervised the unloading of Penwallow’s cargo personally, especially the treasured window glass. He even hopped aboard one of the wagons and rode out to the site of Penwallow’s future plantation house, to make sure that the glass and other materials were delivered in good shape. With the overseer Penwallow had hired, he went over the entire shipment and got the man to sign a receipt that it had all been received intact and unharmed. The overseer took him over the entire site that had been cleared, and showed him the blueprints.

Jack made polite noises, then begged off an invitation to dinner, saying, truthfully, that he had to get back to his ship.

It was a long walk back to the docks, but Jack managed to catch a ride on another wagon that was heading into town.

He arrived back at his ship, receipt in hand, knowing that he’d safely carried out the job Mr. Beckett had entrusted to him. He figured he’d earned those new clothes—as well as his wages. And that was good, because now he had something to save for. Jack Sparrow was determined to buy the *Wicked Wench*.

Cutler Beckett sat in his office one Sabbath afternoon, listening to the sound of the rain as he caught up on his correspondence. This afternoon, it was a positive deluge; water ran down the windows in clear sheets, and the office grew even dimmer. Beckett frowned and shook his head as he lit a candle. The rainy season in Calabar ran from approximately April until July, and here it was, late June. As far as Beckett was concerned, this bloody weather could stop any day now.

As the candle flame flickered, it briefly illuminated a picture hung on the wall, a portrait of one of the EITC's finest vessels, and Beckett found himself wondering where Jack Sparrow was, and how he was doing. When would the *Wicked Wench* come sailing back into the harbor of Calabar?

Sparrow had been gone for months now, and yet, Beckett found himself thinking of him rather often—something he found surprising. Out of sight, out of mind, as the old saying went. And yet…Beckett smiled faintly, remembering that notable luncheon with Penwallow. It had been obvious that Sparrow had never dined in that style before, but he'd pulled it off. Quick, observant, and adaptable, that was Sparrow. Beckett hadn't missed the way the captain had copied his own impeccable table manners. Frankly, he'd looked more the gentleman than Lord Penwallow.

Cutler Beckett was aware that Lord Penwallow was even more pleased with his own work, and, especially Beckett's assistance in the matter of his new plantation. It was only a matter of time, he figured, before the older man expressed his gratitude by sponsoring Beckett in his quest for a title.

And when he does, Beckett thought, *I'll owe some of it to Jack Sparrow, who practically charmed the old buffoon's wig off.* He chuckled, softly. Mercer had reported that Sparrow had not only captivated Lord Penwallow, but also his own matronly housekeeper. A young man of undeniable talents…

Mercer had also told him that Sparrow had sailed out of Calabar harbor with a runaway slave aboard his ship, one that he'd knowingly helped to escape. When Beckett had demanded to know how Mercer had discovered this, his enforcer had explained that the slaves in Calabar chattered among themselves, sharing their histories, experiences, and gossip. Ian Mercer apparently had sources planted among the slaves and those close to them. The runaway's name was Chamba, and he'd been the property of the former portmaster, Benjamin Blount, the one whose accounts had been doctored, the man who'd escaped Calabar just hours ahead of Mercer and his men. He'd gone upriver, into the interior, and hadn't been heard from since.

Mercer had reported that the news of Chamba's escape to freedom had spread like fever amongst the local slave population, and that now they seemed to regard Captain Jack Sparrow as some kind of heroic rescuer…a white knight, so to speak. Beckett's faint smile turned ironic.

From what Mercer reported, Sparrow's stealing that lad right out from under Blount's nose required both wit and audacity. I really do need to gain his allegiance. Adaptable as Sparrow is, he would make an exemplary operative for me, serving as my eyes and ears in some exotic foreign port…

Beckett heard a small scraping sound from the little room to his right, and turned his head, listening intently. *She* was in there…in the room he'd had set up to be her sleeping quarters and workplace. *She* was his key to Zerzura, and he wanted her close to him.

Ayisha, they said her name was…what was she doing now?

The ugly creature rarely spoke, and then only a few words of the pidgin used by the slave traders and slaves. Mercer had learned it, which Beckett found very useful. There was no denying it, Ian Mercer was proving to be the best operative Beckett had ever hired. And yet, neither

Beckett nor Mercer had so far been able to get the sewing woman to speak beyond murmured “yes sirs” and “no sirs” plus a few other monosyllables.

In the room next door, he heard the muffled *clack* of the big loom. The creature was weaving again.

Ugly and seemingly half-witted as she was, Ayisha had talent in her hands, he had to concede that much. Mistress Goodwright had waxed positively rhapsodic over the textiles and fabrics she wove, the garments she sewed, and her other skills involving thread, yarn, and so forth.

Beckett relaxed again as the loom continued its muffled sounds, and broke the sealing wax on yet another piece of correspondence. Perhaps, he thought idly, she was nothing more than what she seemed to be…a half-witted sewing and weaving woman who had one extraordinary skill. He’d heard of people like that before, though they were rare.

But the slave trader Mercer had tracked down, the one who styled himself “Duke” Ancona Wren-John, the man who had captured the people whose jewelry proclaimed them to be from Zerzura, had, when Beckett had taken him to look at Ayisha, sworn that yes, this woman had indeed been one of the slaves he’d captured that day out on the savannah of Ethiopia. “Oh, yes, the ugly one! Who could forget that face?” had been Ancona’s exact words.

The slave trader had proven his claim by showing Cutler Beckett more of that incredible jewelry, all of which now resided in Beckett’s most secure strongbox. All of it had come from the same group as the old priest and Ayisha—all of it except the royal pectoral.

Cutler Beckett’s lips tightened in annoyance. He’d questioned “Duke” Wren-John extensively about that pectoral. The slave trader could only recall that he’d taken it off a half-starved, half-grown youth his raiding party had found wandering alone on the edge of the desert. The lad had been too weak to walk for the first half of the journey, but had proved tougher than he’d looked at first. After a few

weeks of regular feedings, he'd been able to march into Calabar as part of the coffle. Duke had sold the entire coffle in Calabar, and every one of them had been immediately loaded onto a ship. A ship bound *where*? Beckett had asked. Duke Wren-John had shrugged. He had no idea, except it had been bound for the New World, like almost all slave ships.

Cutler Beckett grimaced slightly. If only they could have gotten the boy, too. From what Duke had said, the lad at least had been able to talk, and seemed of normal wit—for a slave. *Unlike Ayisha*, Cutler Beckett thought.

But at least he had Ayisha. She had to have come from Zerzura—hadn't she? *And if she came from there*, Beckett thought, *she must know where it is….*

Beckett's fingers tightened on the page he was holding. He had to figure out how to get the truth from her. Too bad he couldn't just turn her over to Mercer, and let him wring it from her by whatever means his enforcer chose, but there were…complications…connected with that idea.

If only I could gain her trust. Her dull-wittedness might well be a ruse, but how to unmask her?

Beckett pursed his lips. He'd tried having her spend time with his house slaves, but Ayisha didn't talk to them, either, any more than was necessary to do her job. She followed orders given to her in pidgin, if stated simply. So she couldn't be completely lacking in intelligence. He allowed himself a faint sigh of frustration.

His gaze sharpened as he came to the next letter. He recognized the handwriting on the envelope as that of his cousin, Susan. Why would she be writing to him? The paper bore no telltale black border…and it wasn't as if there was anyone left in his family he cared about…

Beckett broke the wax seal, and opened the letter.

My dear cousin,

I write to you today to ask your help. My son, John, is now twelve years of age, which means he must soon be apprenticed. John fancies that he would like to see the World, and I know you have done splendidly, cousin Cutler, earning for yourself a high place ina Company that is Known to all and Respected.

I ask you to recommend John to your superiors in one of the English offices of the East India Trading Company. If he were apprenticed here in England, I could see my boy perhaps during Christmastide, and if I traveled to the city. It is hard on a Mother’s heart to lose her son, and I would bless you for helping me keep him here in England until he is a bit more grown.

I must note that I asked your father to take John on as an apprentice and he refused me, saying that it was his perception that my son has “no head for business.”

I believe Jonathan is incorrect in his judgment, dismissing John so unfeelingly. John is a likely boy, eager to learn. He has done well with his schooling, though I must concede his Latin tutor despaired of him. But he can read and cipher, and he writes a good, clear hand, so Jonathan’s refusal made no sense to me, Except it helped me to see why you and our dear departed Jane could not Feel the familial affection normally due a father by his offspring.

I hope this letter finds you well, Cutler, and that you will find it in your heart to help us. Your cousin Matthew sends his best Regards, as do we all, as well as our Prayers, thinking of you in those distant lands filled with Heathens and who knows what else.

Please let me hear from you soonest, Cutler. And if you are able to help, please accept our grateful Appreciation.

Yr. Affect. Cousin,

Susan Beckett

Cutler Beckett read the letter impatiently. He barely remembered his second cousin as a plump and placid baby, then as a little pest that tagged around after him on the few occasions he’d visited his cousin Matthew and his wife, Susan. Still, he was minded to do as Susan requested, if only

for the reason that it would annoy his father to have yet another Beckett working for a rival trading company.

Beckett reread the latter, and his eyes stopped on the phrase “no head for business.” He knew *exactly* how Jonathan Beckett had sounded when he’d said that, because he’d heard that very phrase one late April day. Beckett closed his eyes, remembering. For a moment it seemed he was back in Father’s office in Springhaven, feeling the warm caress of a Somersetshire spring….

“Come in, come in, Cutler, and sit down.” Jonathan Beckett regarded his youngest with a perfunctory smile, gesturing the eighteen-year-old to a seat. “I suppose you’re wondering why I asked you to come here today.”

Cutler nodded warily, sitting poised on the edge of the elegant leather chair. The office was a big room, smelling of pipe tobacco and whiskey, with framed hunting prints on the wall, and copies of ledgers, instead of books, lining the shelves. Even though it was spring, a small fire burned in the grate. Mornings were still chilly. His father was usually up before dawn, working…or sometimes he simply began work when he came in from London, after a long night…out.

“Cutler, have you ever thought about what you would like to do with your life?” Jonathan Beckett asked, resting his chin on his interlaced fingers.

Young Beckett hesitated. “I have, yes, sir,” he said, finally.

“And what profession have you chosen?”

“I’ve thought of several things, sir,” Cutler said, hesitantly. “Careers that I would enjoy, that I seem to have an aptitude for…” He trailed off, wondering if he’d confided too much.

“Such as?” prompted his father.

“I could be a scholar,” Beckett said. “My tutors have told me I have the necessary skills, and they’ve been…

complimentary…about my studies.”

His father nodded. There was an expression in his eyes Cutler couldn’t read. “What does a scholar do, Cutler? Would you become a dominie, start your own school?”

“I don’t think so, sir, that’s not what I’d envisioned. I know I would be accepted at Cambridge or Oxford. I could become a professor there.”

“Does it pay well?”

“I…don’t know, sir. But that needn’t be a major concern.” Cutler knew when his father died, he would inherit enough to keep him comfortable for his entire life. He’d had visions of a charming cottage, with a little rose garden, where he and his sister, Jane, could live, near a great university. She could keep house for him, and neither of them would have to feel like an unwanted mouth to feed ever again.

“Hmmmmmm…do they give scholars titles?”

“Sometimes, Father, if they have contributed to the sum of human knowledge. I’ve studied the work of one man that may well achieve it. His name is Isaac Newton.”

“Never heard of him,” his father said. “So is that what you’re set on?”

Cutler didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he clasped them tightly in his lap, “I don’t know,” he said. “Perhaps someday. But I would like to see the world, sir, before settling down at a university. So I thought…I thought…” He stammered to a halt.

“Out with it, lad!” his father said, his dark eyes glinting. He didn’t actually seem angry, so Cutler took a deep breath.

“I’ve enjoyed the times I’ve gone with you to the city, and worked in the shipping company’s office,” he said, “Going over the records, reconciling costs and expenditures, checking cargo manifests and ports of destination and bills of lading…” Cutler looked up at his father. “Sir, I know you plan to retire soon, and turn over the management of the

Beckett Trading Company to my brothers. Perhaps I could join them in working there?”

Jonathan Beckett began to laugh, shaking his head. “Cutler, m’boy…won’t do. I know you write a good hand and can cipher with the best of them, but you’ve no head for business, lad,” he said.

Cutler felt his cheeks flush, and damned himself for this betraying sign. *He’s wrong. I **do** have a head for business.*

“So you’d like to see the world, eh?” Jonathan Beckett said. Languidly he polished his small, square-lensed reading spectacles. “Well, Cutler, if you were Jonathan Junior, or Bartholomew, strong, tall, strapping lads, I could purchase you a good commission in the service of the king.” His gaze traveled up and down his youngest son’s short, slight frame. “But I think you’ll agree that that’s not a practical idea, Cutler.”

The young man’s flush deepened. His father had never forgiven him for not being tall and strong. It didn’t matter how smart he was—and he knew for a fact he could reason rings around either of his brothers—all this wretched man sitting before him could see was his size and lack of brute muscle. *He can go to Hades*, Cutler thought, setting his jaw.

“You show no kinship to the land…never could induce you to ride to hounds with us, could I? No, you stayed home with your sister, Jane. For all I know, you both played with her dollies.” He chuckled aloud. “Don’t look so affronted, boy. I’m just having a little joke. You have no sense of humor, I swan.” The elder Beckett laid down his spectacles on the desk, and huffed an exasperated sigh. “So it’s not as though I could have you managing my tenant farms or the gristmills, either, is it?”

Cutler couldn’t manage a civil reply, so he merely shook his head.

“At any rate, I was prepared for this,” Jonathan continued. “I knew bloody well you wouldn’t be able to think of something suitable and practical, so I’ve figured it out for

you, son.” He took a paper out of his desk. “I’ve made an… investment…”

He means a bribe, Cutler thought.

“An investment in a nice little vicarage for you, Cutler. You’ll be a parson, and I can’t think of any life more suitable for you. I mean, you won’t come into London with us, to have a little fun, tumble a few wenches, drink and gamble a bit, you prefer to bury yourself in your books, your Latin and Greek. You live like a parson now, boy. You might as well *be* one, eh?” He guffawed at his own wit.

Cutler shook his head again. He was so angry he was trembling, but he had to try and make his father understand. “No, sir,” he managed to force the words out. “That would not be an appropriate profession for me. I’m not suited to it at all.”

“Of course you are!” his father insisted. “Look at yourself! You’d make a perfect clergyman! You can write, your tutors told me, with proper grammar and even a bit of elegance when the situation demands. You’ll dash off those sermons in no time at all! And aside from that, well…it’s just a round of garden parties, and balls, afternoon teas and socials. There are always girls from good but poor families dangling after the village vicar, you know that. You might even have your pick!” Folding his hands on his desk, he regarded his son with a smile and a satisfied nod, obviously very pleased with himself.

Cutler stared at him in complete silence for a long moment, struggling to control himself. Finally, when he could keep his voice even, he said, “Father, I realize you meant well.” *Do I?* he wondered, but he plunged on. “But I fear I cannot accept this. I have no calling, sir.”

The elder Beckett waved his hand dismissively. “Oh, tosh, boy. When you arrive at your parish, and read some tracts, a bit of holy writ, it will come to you. I’m sure that’s how they all start out.”

I have to make him understand, Cutler thought, desperation creeping up on him like an enveloping shadow. Taking a deep breath, he made himself tell the truth. “Father, I am not even a believer.”

“Ha ha!” His father’s chuckle was genuinely amused. “Not sure I am either, Cutler my boy, for all that I sing hymns with the best of them on the Sabbath. What does that matter?”

“It matters because it’s not what I want to do,” Cutler said. Folding his arms across his chest, he sat there in mutinous silence.

“You’ll come around, Cutler,” Jonathan Beckett said. “I’ve already told your mother, and you should have seen how happy she was to hear of it. She wept with happiness. You know she’s devout.” He cleared his throat. “You also can’t have missed the fact that she isn’t…robust…these days.” He cleared his throat again. “Not robust at all, I would say she’s…well…let’s just say I believe time is of the essence, my boy. She wants to know that you’re settled, and I agree. It wouldn’t do at this time to deprive her of any bit of happiness, right? We understand each other, don’t we?”

As Cutler sat there, trying to regain enough control to speak, Jonathan Beckett looked back down at the desk. He pulled some papers over to him, then settled his reading spectacles on his nose. “I’m glad that’s settled, boy, and all for the best, I say. You run along now, I’ve work to do.”

Cutler managed to say, “Mother wants me to be happy, Father. She will understand if I choose to do something else.”

Jonathan Beckett looked up at his son over the tops of his spectacles. “Cutler, you didn’t understand me, I see. I shall have to be clearer, even though I don’t like saying such a thing aloud. Cutler, your mother has a wasting disease. Some kind of unknown ailment the doctors can’t diagnose or cure. She’s dying, boy. Seeing you settled as a clergyman is her last wish.”

Cutler Beckett felt himself fill up with rage, as though there was a hole in the top of his head, and vitriol was being poured in. *How dare he? How **DARE** he?*

He sucked in air as though he hadn't breathed in an hour, and found himself on his feet, leaning forward across his father's desk. For once that assured, slightly mocking glint was gone from Jonathan Beckett's expression. He leaned away from his son, clearly taken aback.

"How *dare* you try to use my mother to manipulate me, you devil?" Cutler said, his voice low and so full of menace that Jonathan Beckett actually looked frightened. "A 'wasting disease' is it? An 'unknown ailment?' You lying, filthy *hypocrite*! I know what's wrong with my mother, and so do you! She has the damned *pox*, and *you* gave it to her!"

Cutler leaned farther forward. His father pushed back in his chair, his eyes wide and frightened. Guilt marked his features like a brand. Cutler raged on. "Why it hasn't brought you down yet, I don't know, but if I believed, I'd pray every day that it would! To claim you don't know what's wrong with her, after what *you* have done to her, after…cavorting…with your strumpets and trulls and legions of mistresses. My mother is a pure and chaste woman; you know that to be true. And yet she lies upstairs, dying by inches, because *you* brought the fruit of your whoring home to your own marriage bed, and infected her. I *despise* you."

Turning sharply, Cutler strode out of the office. He took the stairs two at a time up to his room, where he quickly packed his bags, and took the small store of money he'd been saving in his strongbox, counting it quickly. He frowned, biting his lip.

"Here, Cutler," came a voice, and he looked up to see his sister, Jane, standing in the open doorway of his room, holding out a small purse. "I've been saving, too. You take it, so you can get away. And then when you're settled, you can send for me, the way we've always planned."

Cutler stared at her, wondering how she knew. Guessing his unasked question, Jane smiled faintly, a smile that wrenched at his heart. “I was outside in the hall while you were talking to Father,” she admitted. “I heard it all. I’m glad someone finally stood up to that tyrant! And…and… stood up for poor Mother!” she finished, her voice breaking.

Cutler crossed the room to take the little purse. Jane put her arms around him and laid her cheek against his. Her face, he realized, was wet. Awkwardly, he returned her embrace. His throat felt so tight, he thought he might choke. “Thank you, Jane. I will send for you. You have my word.”

“Good-bye, brother,” she whispered. “May Heaven keep you.”

Then she whirled around and ran out of the room.

Slowly, Cutler Beckett walked across the hall, and set his bags down. After tapping lightly on the door, he entered his mother’s sickroom.

He was not there long. When he finally stumbled from the room, leaving his mother weeping behind him, Cutler Beckett felt as though something inside him had died forever. Picking up his bags, he headed down the back stairs. He’d leave by the servant’s quarters. If he walked quickly, he should be able to catch the mail coach on its way into London. And once in London, he knew exactly where he would go….

Cutler Beckett blinked, and that English spring receded into memory. He was here in Africa, and both his mother and Jane were dead. If only he’d sent for Jane when he’d been assigned to the office in Nippon…but to ask her to travel to the other side of the world, alone, was impossible. When he’d received his posting to Africa, he’d written to his sister, telling her it was time, that the voyage to Calabar would take only two months, and that he would send someone to accompany her.

He realized he'd crushed Cousin Susan's letter in his fist. Slowly, painfully, he released his fingers, making an effort to smooth out the letter. Then he took out two blank sheets of paper, dipped his quill, and began writing, quickly.

He'd just finished the letter to the EITC office in London, and the quick note to Cousin Susan, and sealed both missives, when he heard a tap on his door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Mercer, Mr. Beckett."

"Come in, Mercer."

As Mercer entered, Beckett looked up inquiringly. "I've had no luck tracing the big male slave," his operative reported. For once, the Scotsman sounded weary. He must have just come in; he wore dry clothes, but his hair was still wet. "I'm fairly sure he wasn't shipped out on the Triangle, but no one seems to recall who bought him, and the sales records are lacking. I'll have to do a visual inspection, farm by farm." His narrow features grew thoughtful. "Perhaps I'll hire that fellow Duke to go along. That way I'd be sure I'd found the right one."

Beckett shook his head. "Unfortunate," he said. "If we could find this other one, the big male slave Duke spoke of, he might just prove more forthcoming than our sewing woman."

"And if he wasn't inclined to talk, we might be able to use each of them as a way to persuade the other to talk," Mercer said. "Don't worry, Mr. Beckett. I'm not giving up the search. But this weather is so foul, it's hard to get around."

Beckett nodded. "Wait until the end of the rainy season," he said. "There's no point in you slogging around in all this mud, when the rain will be ending soon."

"As you say, Mr. Beckett," the operative agreed, relief in his voice. "It's foul out there, and the roads are like hog wallows." He smiled very faintly, "Speaking of pigs, what's *she* been doing today?" he asked, glancing at the door leading into the sewing room.

“Working, as far as I can tell,” Beckett said. “At least, I’ve heard her weaving, on and off.”

Mercer nodded. “You know, Mr. Beckett, with women, they’re…timid. Easily frightened. Not like a man. I wouldn’t have to actually do any lasting *damage*, to her, sir. Just a few minutes of…persuasion…might bring us all we want to know.”

Cutler Beckett shook his head decisively. “No, Mr. Mercer. I’m not risking that. She’s our only link, at the moment. Remember what happened with the old man.”

“I’d barely started on him,” Mercer said, and Beckett fancied he sounded a bit defensive. “The pain wasn’t even that much. No sign of an apoplexy, no clutching of his chest or anything of the sort.” He paced a bit before the desk. “I’ve handled dozens of interrogations Mr. Beckett, but I’ve never seen anything quite like it. The old savage just closed his eyes…and stopped. Like a clock.”

“I understand,” Beckett said. “And just on the chance that she can do likewise, I am not going to allow any of your persuasive methods. If we can locate the big man, my decision may change.” Beckett sighed. “If only Duke Wren-John could recall where that other one he captured was taken. But he has no idea, except the ship was heading west. Then we’d have three of them! Surely you could persuade one of them to talk.”

Mercer nodded, and Beckett could tell the operative was disappointed by the lack of subjects he might interrogate. He knew Mercer loved that part of his job the most. Beckett frowned thoughtfully. “We need someone who can gain her trust,” the EITC official said, meditatively. “Someone very likeable. Charming. Someone who can discover what she wants, and give it to her. Or promise to, at any rate. Someone—”

Beckett broke off as Mercer’s head turned toward the sewing room door. Gesturing for quiet, the operative walked across the office, shifting his weight carefully so as not to

cause any betraying noise. When he reached the door, he carefully took hold of the knob with his black-gloved hand, then suddenly opened it and looked in.

After a moment, he closed it again, and came back to the desk. In answer to his employer's inquiring glance, Ian Mercer shrugged slightly. "Thought I heard something. But she's just sitting there, sewing."

Beckett stood up and went over to the hiding place for his strongbox, and removed it. Taking the key, he opened it, and stood staring down at the tray containing the Zerzuran pieces. "You know, Mercer," he murmured, "I've thought of something we haven't tried. Perhaps we should show her these, and see if she betrays herself. It can't possibly cause her harm, and observing her reaction might prove illuminating…"

Ayisha sat in her chair, her work before her, but her needle was still. She couldn't see to sew, because she was blinded by tears.

Piye was dead. Her heart ached within her. She'd known the high priest all her life. It was Piye who had taught her the principles of magic, and how to use her power. And now, thanks to the black-gloved Mercer, the man with the death-eyes, Piye was dead.

Ayisha's lips moved in silent prayer for the old man.

For months she'd listened at Cutler Beckett's keyhole, and she'd heard some very interesting things—things that scared her. If Beckett ever realized she spoke English and knew what he and Mercer talked about, her life would be over. She knew that. Today, when she'd listened, she'd heard Beckett and Mercer discussing their hunt for Tarek, and her heart had pounded. Then, she'd heard them say that Piye was dead. Apparently that was the reason Beckett hadn't allowed Mercer to torture her into talking to them—

they were afraid that she could do what Piye had done, and die before revealing information.

She knew what the high priest must have done to bring about his own death. After a lifetime of dedication to Apedemak, honing his body, mind, and spirit to the worship of the god, he must have realized that he was in danger of betraying Zerzura, and the Heart of Zerzura—Apedemak's gift to his chosen people. So he had reached out to the god, begging him to help by stopping his heart.

And Apedemak had granted his prayer.

Realizing that she could not just sit in her chair, idle, Ayisha quickly wiped her face on the edge of her gray shawl, then reached for her shuttle and began to weave. She could weave without thinking, just by feel. The loom clacked rhythmically, and her fingers flew with the shuttle even faster.

It was a good thing she had seen Mercer approaching through the keyhole. If she hadn't, Ayisha knew that she would have been unmasked. And if she were tortured to reveal the location of Kerma, she had no confidence that she could do as Piye had done. Piye had been so attuned to Apedemak…far more than she was.

She wove automatically, while her mind scurried in circles, like a small animal trapped by a circle of hunters. Mercer was going to find Tarek. Sooner or later, he'd find him. He would take Duke with him. Her stomach clenched as she remembered the time they'd brought the slaver in to look at her. Ayisha closed her eyes and wove, fighting panic.

The door between her room and Beckett's office opened. She heard it, but did not turn her head. Instead, Ayisha worked to compose her features to their usual blank passivity.

Footsteps approached.

"Ayisha?" That was Beckett's voice.

She gave a realistic start, and stopped weaving, turning to look at him. Beckett was holding something in his

hands…some kind of tray. Ayisha controlled her features, making sure she did not quite make eye contact, and that her face remained expressionless.

“Ayisha,” said Mercer, and continued in pidgin, “Mr. Beckett would like to know whether you recognize any of these things.” As the operative spoke, Beckett lowered the tray and held it out to her, so it was on her eye level.

Jewelry. It was jewelry, from her home, and some of it was her own. She remembered the feel of the gazelle earrings dangling from her pierced earlobes. Her eyes moved from piece to piece, and she had no trouble keeping her expression blank, since all the pieces had been hers, or belonged to her lost companions on her pilgrimage to Kerma —

NO. Not all.

Her eyes fastened on the pectoral, and her heart leaped, then seemed to stop. It was all she could do not to gasp. Her fingers wanted to reach out and grab that piece of jewelry, hold it against her cheek. She *knew* that royal pectoral.

It had belonged to her brother, Prince Shabako.

Mercer spoke again. “Ayisha, the slave trader Duke sold Mr. Beckett this jewelry. He told us that it had all been taken from captives he’d brought to Calabar and then sold. Do you recognize it?”

There was a dull pain in her right hand. Ayisha didn’t know why her hand was hurting, but the pain helped her to focus, to keep her head. Slowly she looked up, keeping her usual calm, blank expression, not allowing her eyes to meet the white man’s. She shook her head from side to side.

“Are you sure, Ayisha? Duke says most of this jewelry was worn by slaves captured at the same time you were captured. Surely you must have seen it before.”

Her eyes flicked to Mercer, to show that she had heard the man, but she did not allow her gaze to focus on him. Again she shook her head, this time a bit more emphatically.

For long seconds they all remained like that, no one moving, no one speaking. Ayisha concentrated on the pain in her hand, keeping her eyes unfocused, her features vapid.

Finally Beckett straightened up. “I thought for a moment that she recognized something,” he said, in English. “But she doesn’t seem to. We’ll have to think of something else.”

The two men left the room, shutting the door behind them.

Ayisha sat unmoving for many minutes, in case their leaving was a trap, and they were watching her through the keyhole, as she had watched and listened to them. But then she heard the door to the corridor in Mr. Beckett’s office open, then shut, and, then their footsteps going down the hallway, accompanied by the low murmur of their voices.

Moments later, more faintly, she heard them on the stairs.

They were gone.

She sagged in her chair, finally allowing herself to react to what she had seen. Clutching her hands to her breast, she rocked back and forth, not knowing what to do, how to feel. Her brother…her brother had been captured, just as she had been. He, too, was a slave. But at least now she had some idea of where to search for him. Almost all slaves were taken across the ocean, to those land masses she had seen on the other side of the globe. They were taken west.

Her right hand still hurt, Ayisha realized. She lowered it, staring down at it, realizing it was badly cramped. Her fingers were stiff; her palm burned with pain. It was an effort to make her fingers move, but she did, and then saw what she held in her hand, the thing that had saved her. The pain had distracted her, helped her remember not to show her feelings.

It was the shuttle she used in her weaving. She had clutched it so hard that its outline was impressed into the

flesh of her palm, almost as though it had been branded there.

Ayisha sat there, staring at it, thinking of her brother, and of Piye. A tear splashed into the center of the shuttle imprint. With an effort that was painful, she closed her fingers on it, reflecting that human tears were as salty as the sea.

The sea that she must cross, if she wanted to find her brother.

Silently, Ayisha—No! For these few moments, she was once again Amenirdis, Royal Princess of Zerzura. And as Amenirdis, her true self, she renewed her vow to escape. She and Tarek would escape, and they would find a ship, somehow, and get aboard it. Together, they would sail westward, in search of Prince Shabako.

Closing her eyes, Amenirdis prayed swiftly to Apedemak. *Great Lion of Lions…help me in my quest. Send me a ship. Send me a ship, and someone to sail it for me. Send me a guide to help me find my brother. I ask this of you, Great Lion of Lions. Hear my prayer.*

Send me a ship….

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Chapter Eight
The Devil in the Deep Blue Sea

Jack Sparrow lay sprawled on his bunk in the darkness of his captain's cabin, sweating, wondering whether a few swigs of rum would help him go back to sleep. It was mid-July, and the *Wicked Wench* had been sailing south past the bulge of Africa for almost two weeks. From their current position, the equator was less than a week's sail away.

It was hot and muggy in the cabin, even with the windows open all the way. Usually, Jack was tired enough at the end of a day to sleep straight through till dawn, but for some reason he'd awakened, and was unable to fall back asleep. Not long ago he'd heard the ship's bell ring eight times. *Eight bells of the middle watch; just a couple of hours to go until dawn.*

He lay there, trying to relax, eyes closed, for several minutes more, before he sat up with a muttered curse. Heading over to his captain's pantry, he pulled the door open and located the bottle of EITC-issued rum by feel. Why waste the good stuff when all he wanted was a couple of jolts to make him sleepy again?

As he stood there, the bottle in his hand, the other hand on the cork, he felt a wayward breeze brush his body from the stern window, and it felt very good. He realized where he wanted to be wasn't back in his bunk, but up on deck, feeling the wind, beneath the stars.

Jack put the unopened bottle of rum back into the pantry and closed the door. There was no moon, and the inside of his cabin was very dark, but he knew every inch, so he didn't light a lantern. Heading over to the chair where

he’d hung his clothes, he pulled on his britches, then his loose-sleeved shirt. He didn’t button the shirt or tuck it in; it would be cooler hanging loose around him. He didn’t bother to put on shoes, or tie up his hair, only raked it back from his face with his fingers.

The door to his cabin swung open with barely a sound, and then he was walking forward, out from under the overhang. He made his way along the weather deck until he was standing forward of the mainmast, and then looked up, checking the *Wench*’s mains’ls. They were set as he’d ordered, to run before the wind, and were properly taut, he noted with satisfaction. He glanced forward to the bow, then back all the way to the taffrail, seeing that the ship’s running lanterns were lit, casting small pools of light on the decks, like spatters of molten gold.

Turning, he headed aft, and when he reached the ladder leading up to the quarterdeck, mounted the steps quickly, his bare feet knowing every dip and groove. As he set foot on the deck, he spoke softly, so as not to startle Roger Prescott, the helmsman on watch. “Ahoy, mate,” he said. “I see we’re making good speed.”

The helmsman swung his head quickly toward him, then nodded. “Aye, we’re running nicely before the wind, Cap’n. Is everything all right?”

“Let’s just check,” Jack said, walking over to peer at the binnacle, with its lantern illuminating the face of the big compass, to check their heading, then glancing at the traverse board with its movable pegs showing the progress of their course during the watch.

“Everything’s fine,” Jack reassured Prescott.

“Surprise inspection, Cap’n?” Prescott asked, with a touch of humor.

Jack chuckled softly. “Do I *look* like I’m here for an inspection?” he asked, dryly.

“Frankly, no, Cap’n.”

“Just couldn’t sleep, so I decided to nip up here and enjoy a bit of fresh air.” He walked over to stand beside Roger for a moment, feeling the light wind of the *Wench*’s passage on his face and half-bared torso like a benediction. “Ahhhhhhh…” he sighed. “That feels very good indeed. It’s like a midday swamp in my cabin.”

“That draft does feel good, Cap’n,” Prescott agreed. “Still, when I finish me watch, I know *I’ll* sleep like a babe.”

Jack had a thought, and smiled. “Tell you what, Mr. Prescott, why don’t you take yourself off and get a bit of extra shut-eye? I’ll take the rest of your watch.”

Prescott didn’t have to be asked twice. “Why, thankee, Cap’n, that’d be most kind of ye. I’ll just nip off to me hammock, then.”

“Sleep well,” Jack said, envying the old sailor a bit, but when he took the big ship’s wheel in his hands, he changed his mind. Sleep was overrated. He savored the feel of his ship beneath his bare feet, the spokes of the ship’s wheel feeling alive against his palms, the touch of the night breeze cooling his damp flesh.

Jack looked down at the sea, checking the angles of the waves, then up again, to confirm that the amount of luff in the main tops’l was the way he wanted it to be. Yes, all was right; the *Wench* was rigged correctly for the speed and direction of the wind.

His duty done, Jack then threw his head back and looked *way* up, past the sails and the spars of the mainmast. The bright star he’d been expecting to see winked at him. *Fomalhaut…the Southern Fish.* To his right, the Milky Way was sinking into the west, a bright swath of stars containing Sagittarius. Jack glanced to his left, knowing that Achernar was rising in the southeast, but the sails hid it from his view.

He sighed with contentment, thinking that life held nothing better than the feel of a good ship running before the wind, with a sky full of stars to guide her.

For a while he was content simply to savor the moment, enjoying this private time with his ship. The coast of western Africa lay to Jack's left, he knew, though he couldn't see it. As he stood there, automatically steering the ship, his mind drifted back in time, to another sleepless night, and the day that had followed it. That endless night, followed by the day when everything had changed….

After finding One Tooth Tommy's body, Jack had wandered around Shipwreck Cove, tired, but too keyed up to sleep. For a while he'd considered going off to find Melinda, but he'd given her the last of his money as payment for fetching Teague and his men. He hadn't a penny to his name at the moment.

In the end he'd wound up sitting on the dock, leaning against a mooring post, feet dangling over the night-colored water, thinking about what both Barbossa and Tommy had said about the sinking of their ship. Their words created images that chased themselves round and round in his mind, like a ship caught by a maelstrom.

At some point Jack dozed off, waking with a start when sunlight crept over the peaks of the caldera to touch his face. He yawned, stretched, and rubbed his eyes, seeing the bright rays turn the water of the cove to indigo. A few puffy clouds, still tinged pink, hovered low in the sky.

Jack looked down at the water, placidly lapping against the mooring post, remembering Old Tommy's body bumping against that same post last night. The conviction that the old pirate's death hadn't been, as Teague had claimed, an accident, made him set his jaw with determination. He climbed to his feet. *Teague can sit around and wait for more things to happen, but there's nothing says **I** have to. It's time to get to the bottom of this, if only to prove to the All-Powerful Keeper of the Code that things really **are** going on under his very nose.*

Realizing he hadn’t eaten the night before, Jack headed for *Troubadour*, where, as a sometime member of her crew, he could claim breakfast. He moved quietly through the sleeping ship like a ghost, getting his clean shirt out of his sea chest, along with his sliver of soap and his comb. He went back up to the weather deck to commandeer a bucket, then filled it with fresh water for his ablutions. He wound up scrubbing his hands several times. It was probably his imagination, but he could have sworn they were still slimy from poking and prodding the corpse last night.

After washing up, Jack shaved, changed his shirt and combed his hair, then tied his old bandanna around his head to protect it from the sun. Since *Troubadour* was in port, the cook wasn’t up yet, but he knew every inch of the vessel, and had no trouble foraging in the tiny galley.

Nodding to the pirate on watch, Jack headed back down the gangplank and walked purposefully along the docks, heading south. One of the docks ended only a short distance from the wall of the rocky caldera enclosing the water of the cove. Strung between the dock and the narrow strip of beach was a rickety rope footbridge. Jack strode casually along the thick cable of rope, barely bothering with the thinner, waist-high rope serving as a handrail. When he reached the end, he jumped down, boots sinking into the sand, and headed left, in the direction of the tunnel ships used to enter Shipwreck Cove.

He walked for about fifteen minutes until he reached a section of the rocky wall that jutted out slightly, concealing a rift in the rock. A narrow channel of water flowed between the cliff walls. Jack turned right, watching his step, and staying close to the rocky wall. The opening was quite narrow, only about ten feet across from wall to wall. After the first forty or fifty feet it opened up, and the water channel widened to reveal a small, hidden inlet running back into the mountain. Jack had discovered this inlet, plus several similar ones scattered around the cove, when he

was a boy. He'd never shown them to anyone, until Esmeralda had been looking for a place to tie up the little dory she'd borrowed from Don Rafael, the one they used to row out through the tunnel and around the perimeter of Shipwreck Island in search of places to swim.

Jack walked along on the narrow strip of sand and rock running beside the water of the inlet. Far overhead, sunlight filtered through the rocky rift in the mountain. Straggly brush and long beach grass brushed his boots. The channel widened out until it was nearly forty feet across. The opening didn't go all the way out to the sea, like the tunnel pirate ships navigated to enter Shipwreck Cove, but dead-ended in a perilous cliff half a mile from the entrance to the cove.

When Jack had first shown Esmeralda his secret inlet, suggesting she moor her dory there, he'd neglected to mention to her his primary reason for keeping their meetings secret. He'd been too embarrassed to admit that Teague had ordered him not to see her, because he, Jack Sparrow, wasn't good enough for a Pirate Lord's granddaughter. Instead, he'd merely suggested they'd have more freedom if they met secretly. Esmeralda had been delighted with the idea, and, until Christophe had followed them that fateful day, they'd enjoyed making the inlet into their private rendezvous. They'd spent a couple of mornings collecting driftwood and using it to build a makeshift platform to serve as a dock to moor the dory.

Reaching the little boat, Jack climbed into it, stowed his spyglass carefully, and untied the painter from the iron ring he'd hammered into the biggest and sturdiest of the logs. Unshipping the oars, he began to row. He'd gone only about fifty feet when he heard a cry and looked up. "Jack! Jack! Wait!"

A small figure was running down the little beach, her booted feet sinking into the sand. Esmeralda was dressed similarly to Jack, in a loose shirt, britches, and waistcoat.

She carried a leather satchel over her shoulder. Beneath her hat, her long black hair was pulled up and tied at the back of her head. It waved behind her as she ran, like a black plume, or a spirited horse's tail. Jack's grim expression brightened. "Esmeralda!" He stopped rowing. The dory continued to glide.

She reached the small dock that extended out over the water. "Turn that boat around, and come back here," she called. "I am coming with you, Jack Sparrow. You're not going swimming without me!"

Jack cupped his hands around his mouth. "Not going swimming. Going rowing around the cove. It'll be hot and dull, *señorita*."

Esmeralda put her hands on her hips and stood there, her expression perplexed. After a moment, she shrugged. "I don't care what you're doing, or why," she shouted back. "Come back here and toss me that painter, so I can climb in."

Jack shrugged, turned the dory, and rowed back. As he neared their makeshift dock, he tossed her the line. Quickly, Esmeralda pulled the little boat over to her. After lowering the leather satchel in, she followed, climbing in carefully, settling onto the seat facing him. Shoving them away from the little dock, she quickly coiled the painter. "I brought food," she said, indicating the bag.

Jack nodded, and began rowing along the inlet, heading for the cove. After a moment, he looked up at her. "It's still early," he observed. "What brought you down here at this hour?"

Esmeralda hesitated, biting her lower lip. "Well…"

"Yes?" he urged.

"I was coming down here to move the dory to one of the other inlets you showed me."

Jack blinked at her. "Move it? Why?" He thought of what it would have been like to come here and find the little boat

gone. That seemed a clear message, all right. He scowled at her, hurt. “You didn’t want to go swimming with me again?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “That’s not it at all!”

He regarded her inquiringly, but didn’t speak. After another minute, she sighed, then ducked her head, intently studying the toes of her boots. “I was planning to hide it elsewhere, then either find you or leave you a message to meet me, so we could go there together,” she admitted.

Jack cocked his head at her as he drew back on the oars. “Why?” he asked, finally. There was only one reason he could think of for her to do what she’d described—but he could hardly believe he was correct.

Esmeralda shrugged. “I…I didn’t want Christophe coming along,” she murmured.

I was right! Jack’s heart leaped, but he worked to keep his expression neutral. “Why, Esmeralda?”

She was staring at her boots again. “He…well, lately, he…he made me…uneasy.” After a moment, she raised her head and stared at him, her dark eyes stormy. “Jack, he *pushes*. You must have noticed. Lately, he never misses a chance to…touch…me.”

Jack, thinking of how those “touches” had infuriated him, nodded. “I’ve noticed.”

“Anyway, I didn’t like it. He’s too forward. And,” she drew a deep breath, “while the three of us were together, I never got a chance to talk to *you*.” She bit her lip, her voice going so soft he could barely hear her. “Jack, I’ve missed you.”

Hearing this, he couldn’t repress a rather foolish grin. “Oh,” he said, pulling back on the oars. As he leaned forward again, his eyes met hers, then they both looked down. *What should I do?* he wondered, holding the oars suspended, letting the dory glide toward the narrow part of the inlet, and the entrance to Shipwreck Cove. *I don’t want to push, obviously. But she’s confiding in me. Just as a*

friend? He looked back up and she was still sitting there, leaning forward, her expression part anxious, part wary.

Dammit, in for a penny, in for a pound, Jack decided, and abruptly ceased rowing and unshipped the oars. “Esmeralda,” he said, meeting her eyes. Reaching forward, he took both of her hands in his. “I’ve missed you, too. You have no idea how much.”

“You did?” Color touched her cheeks, visible even beneath her tan.

“I did,” he said. “Every day. Hardly an hour went by that I didn’t think about you.”

Esmeralda smiled a little, then lowered her eyes to regard their clasped hands. A strand of black hair had come free, swinging down to touch her cheek. Slowly, she interlaced her fingers with his, then squeezed Jack’s hands slightly. “I’m glad you missed me,” she whispered. “For a while there, you were so…distant. I thought you’d changed your mind, and didn’t like me anymore.”

“Oh, no,” Jack said, softly. “Nothing could be further from the truth.” He took a deep breath. It felt strange, telling the complete truth. But Esmeralda had been honest with him, he could tell. She deserved nothing less from him. “I thought you fancied Christophe, love. So I steered clear.”

Her mouth fell open in surprise. “No,” she said, finally, shaking her head. “Oh, Jack, *no*.”

Jack smiled at her, then, greatly daring, he lifted her right hand up and bent forward. Gently, he kissed the back of her hand, letting his mouth linger on her skin, then pressed her palm to his cheek. He heard her draw in a breath, and felt her tremble a little. When he raised his head, he found she was still leaning toward him. Her cheeks were flushed, and her dark eyes were soft, full of promise.

Their faces were only inches apart.

Did he lean forward, or did she? Jack didn’t know. All he knew was that he could smell her faint perfume, mixed with the scent of her skin, and a hint of clean sweat. It was a

warm, seductive scent that sent his head spinning and his heart racing. If she turned her head just a little…

If he turned his head just a little…

Her mouth was warm, her lips soft beneath his. As he kissed her, her lips parted slightly, but Jack reminded himself to hold back. He didn't want to *push*. Besides, this kiss was sweet and perfect just as it was.

He didn't want it to end, but he felt the pressure of her mouth ease, just a fraction, so he sat back. They regarded each other for a long moment. Esmeralda smiled shyly. "Now what?"

Jack smiled bemusedly back at her. *Now I turn this dory around and row back to the beach, and we climb out and walk hand-in-hand a little farther on, until we find a nice cushiony patch of beach grass behind a screen of brush. While I spread our waistcoats and my shirt over that patch of grass, you uncork a bottle of wine. And then I unlace your —*

"You said we were going rowing in the cove," she said, breaking into his fantasy. When he blinked at her uncomprehendingly, she cocked her head at him, then, laughing a little, pulled her hands free of his. Reaching over, Esmeralda gave him a little push on his shoulder. "Wake up, Jack! What is it you English say…has the kitty pulled out your tongue?"

"*Huh*?" Jack blinked at her, startled. When he realized what she'd said, and why, he began to laugh. After a moment, she joined him.

Their shared hilarity grounded him, made him realize that his fantasy of finding that patch of beach grass wasn't bloody likely. *At least, not today, and probably not any time soon…*Which was as it should be. Esmeralda was a *lady*, and one perforce spent more time romancing a lady.

Running through a quick mental tally of his acquaintances, Jack wondered which of them might lend

him a bit of money. *I am definitely going to go find Melinda tonight…*

When he could speak again, Jack said, “Esmeralda, the expression you want goes, ‘Has the cat got your tongue.’”

“Oh!” she gasped, wiping her eyes. “My English is good, but not perfect.”

“It’s ruddy good. Better than my Spanish,” Jack reassured her. He took a deep breath, sobering. “And as to going rowing in the cove…I have something I should tell you.”

“What is it?” Her smile vanished. “Something is wrong.”

He nodded, then gave her an edited version of his time for the past two days, saying he’d been looking for the old sailor she’d seen him talking to that night in The Drunken Lady, but hadn’t found him. “So finally I gave up searching, and went for a walk out on the docks. While I was there, I saw something…someone…floating. You can guess who it turned out to be.”

“It was this man Tommy? Tommy of the One Tooth?” Esmeralda was concerned, but not alarmed. Jack could tell she hadn’t put the whole picture together yet. “That’s too bad. Poor old man.”

“Tell me, Esmeralda, did you ever talk to him? Did you meet Barbossa’s crew members after your grandfather picked them up to transport them here, to Shipwreck Cove?”

Her dark brows drew together as she thought. “No, I just saw them in passing during the voyage. I think Captain Barbossa must have warned them away from approaching me.”

Recalling that hideous little homunculus Pintel, Jack could understand that. He nodded. “It’s my guess that by the time I found him, Old Tommy had been dead for at least two days,” he said. “I examined his body after I fished him out of the water, and sent for Teague so he’d know what had happened. He dismissed it all as an accident. A drunken old sot falling off the dock and drowning.”

“Why would you examine Old Tommy’s body?” Now he had her full attention. “What happened to him? How did he die?”

“Teague was probably right. Tommy most likely drowned. But I don’t think it was an accident.”

Her dark eyes widened. “*Murder*?” she whispered.

Jack nodded. Shipping his oars, he started rowing again, aiming for the narrow channel that led into Shipwreck Cove. “I think so,” he said. “There were no signs of foul play on his body, so Teague decided he just fell in and drowned. I think he’s wrong. I think someone filled Old Tommy full of so much rum that he passed out, then chucked him into the cove, maybe held him under to make sure.”

Esmeralda shook her head, frowning. “But…but *why*?”

Shipwreck Cove had its violent side, there was no doubt about it. But actual murder was quite rare—especially the kind of clandestine crime Jack was describing. Pirates were given to more direct means of expressing their dislike or disapproval—such as running each other through in swordfights, or shooting a cheating card or dice player at point-blank range.

“Esmeralda, love, you didn’t hear what Tommy was saying to me that night, but it’s clear to me that *someone* in The Drunken Lady heard him ranting about what happened the night *Cobra* sank. I believe that person, or persons, killed him before he could tell more people about it.”

“What was he saying that could make someone want to kill him?”

“Tommy told me that he *saw* the captain of the attacking rogue ship that night *Cobra* was sunk.”

“He saw the rogue captain that night?” Esmeralda said. Jack nodded. “You mean he was saying he would *recognize* him?”

Jack leaned back, pulling the oars. “Yep. But here’s the most important part. Tommy told me he not only saw the rogue captain the night *Cobra* was sunk,” he paused for

emphasis, “but he also said he’d seen him *here*. In Shipwreck Cove. Just a few days ago. Standing on the deck of that same sloop.”

Esmeralda put her hand to her mouth. “He was saying one of the rogues is *here*?” As she spoke, the dory emerged from the narrow channel, into the wide expanse of the cove, blue-green and tranquil in the early morning sun.

Esmeralda and Jack regarded the pirate hideaway in silence. Quickly, Jack counted all of the ships he could see on this side of the cove, then doubled the number. There were at least fifty pirate vessels moored at the docks, or anchored in the cove. He heard his companion counting in Spanish under her breath. “And you think one of *these* vessels…” she gestured at the ships as she trailed off.

“Sank the *Cobra*. Yes.”

“*Dios mio*!” she muttered.

“Yep,” Jack said. “*Now* you savvy, love.”

“Jack, there are—I don’t know—a dozen sloops here. More.”

“Ah, but I’m betting only *one* is Bermuda-rigged and has that brass bow chaser Captain Barbossa described, love,” Jack said. “Keep a sharp eye while I row.”

He bent to his task, and the little dory threaded its way up and down the ranks of moored vessels on the eastern side of Shipwreck City. It took them at least half an hour to finish checking all the sloops on that side.

“That’s half of them,” Jack muttered, as he turned the dory and headed for the other side of the small center island. “Now for the other side.”

When he reached the docks on the western side of the cove, Jack unshipped the oars to take a breather. He’d been rowing steadily for half an hour, and the tropical heat was rising. “Here, you must be thirsty,” Esmeralda said, uncorking one of the bottles of wine she’d brought. Jack gulped eagerly, then handed the bottle back to her.

She took a few sips, then recorked the bottle and stowed it away. “Let me row for a while,” she said. “Switch seats with me.”

“Wouldn’t look right, letting a lady row,” Jack protested.

“Jack,” she said, nettled, “I’m not a lady, I’m a pirate, just like you. I can row a boat as well as you can. Now hurry up and switch seats with me.”

Jack opened his mouth to remonstrate further, then closed it with a snap, as he remembered just how close one had to come to another person in order to successfully change seats in a small dory without capsizing it. He shrugged. “Who am I to argue, love?”

Keeping their center of gravity low, they wriggled past each other, until they’d reversed their positions. By the time he sat down again, Jack was still breathing fast, but for a far different—and much more pleasant—reason. He was pleased to note that Esmeralda’s cheeks were flushed from more than heat and exertion.

She began rowing along the docks, maneuvering the dory so they could get close to all of the sloops. “Barbossa said Bermuda-rigged,” Jack said. “But we’d better check them all. They might have changed the rigging.”

“If the rogue pirate captain has any sense, he’s rid himself of that bow chaser,” she said.

“Blimey! Wait a moment, love!” Jack exclaimed, suddenly. He was surveying the anchored ships through his spyglass. “There’s a sloop over there, and there’s something shiny on her bow. I can see the sun glinting off it.”

“We’ll get closer,” she said. “But not too close. We don’t want the captain seeing us and deciding we’re a threat.”

“Too right, love.”

Esmeralda began rowing for the northern end of the cove, and Jack, to make things look good, took out some bread and cheese, and the bottle of wine. She unshipped the oars, and they drifted, sharing the food and wine, for all

the world like a couple of pirate lads out rowing about on a lark.

Jack took out his spyglass and swept it around, staring up at the cliffs, then back at the docks, at the towering piled derelict hulks of Shipwreck City, and then at several ships anchored in the cove. He allowed himself only a few moments to look at the sloop in question—but it was enough to accomplish his purpose. He lowered the spyglass and closed his eyes. If he'd been alone, he might have cursed a blue streak, but he wasn't, so he confined himself to just shaking his head and muttering, "Damn. Oh no…"

"What is it?" Esmeralda asked, still rowing. "I want to see, too."

"Wait till we're past them," Jack said. "We don't want him to figure out who we are and what we're doing." He shook his head again. "We *really* don't want that."

She peered at him from beneath the brim of her hat. "Jack, what's going on? You…are you all right? You look sick." As she leaned forward, she examined his face more intently. "You look like you've gotten too much sun."

"Esmeralda," Jack said quietly, "That ship…she's a sloop, Bermuda-rigged, just as Hector Barbossa described. And she's got a brass bow chaser, all right. Foreign work, and it looks to be India work to my eyes. But darlin'…I *know* that ship. That's *Koldunya*. Borya's sloop."

"*What*?" she was so taken aback she lost her grip on one of the oars, and only Jack's quick grab saved it from slithering out of the oarlock. Esmeralda was nearly stammering. "But—but—Borya…you *can't* mean the man I met! The Pirate Lord? It can't be!"

Jack nodded grimly. "It is. I've sailed aboard her. I've rigged and reefed her sails, and gotten drunk with her crew—and her captain, too. That's *Koldunya*—means 'witch' in Russian—and she belongs to Boris Palachnik, the Pirate Lord of the Caspian Sea. Borya's our rogue pirate captain."

Esmeralda bit her lip and rowed steadily for several minutes, until she'd reached a spot on the other side of the sloop, not too close. "Hand me that spyglass."

"Look all around," Jack cautioned her. "Not just at *Koldunya*."

She nodded abstractedly, as she went through much the same charade as Jack had, until she finally allowed herself to focus on the sloop for a few moments. A minute later, she lowered the telescope and handed it to Jack. "Today we have seen at least eight other Bermuda-rigged sloops. It is not inconceivable that another captain captured a bow chaser of this type. So this could be just…" she snapped her fingers impatiently, searching for a word. "You know… happenchance? Is that it?"

"Happenstance," Jack corrected. "Means coincidence. Do you really believe that, love?"

She sighed, worrying her lower lip for a moment. "No," she said, finally. "Perhaps I might, if Tommy of the One Tooth was still alive. But if he was talking about seeing this captain, and then he is dead…" She turned her hands palm up. "Then no. It can't be coincidence. That is not believable."

They stared at each other for a moment. "So now what, Jack? What do we do? Who should we tell?"

Jack thought fast. "*You* should tell Don Rafael. And get him to tell Teague. As for me"—he leaned toward her—"switch places with me again. I'm going to row back to Shipwreck City and find Barbossa and get him to look at *Koldunya*'s bow."

Esmeralda didn't argue. They changed seats, and Jack began rowing them back toward the city with all possible speed, though he took a route that would keep several anchored ships between the dory and Borya's vessel for most of their route.

No sooner had they tied the dory to the mooring post than Jack leaped out and gave Esmeralda a hand up onto

the dock. “Head straight back to *Venganza*. If you find Captain Barbossa there, tell him to come to Shipwreck City and wait for me in The Drunken Lady. Otherwise, just explain to Don Rafael what we saw while we were rowing around, looking for a good spot to have our picnic, savvy?”

She nodded, and they headed off in opposite directions.

Jack plunged into the hodgepodge that was Shipwreck City. He raced up crooked flights of stairs, down narrow hallways, and leaped over uneven footing. He was surprised to discover that it wasn’t even noon yet—waking up that morning out on the dock seemed to have happened half a lifetime ago.

Shipwreck City never really slept; there were always places open where a pirate could get a drink, or a wench, or buy a weapon. But it did tend to be at its lowest ebb before noon, because of all the roistering that went on by candlelight. Jack’s boots thudded loudly as he ran along a corridor, causing several denizens to poke their unkempt heads out of doors, demanding to know where the fire was.

Jack shouted, “Sorry, mate!” back a time or two, then quit bothering, saving his breath for running. He yanked open the door to every tavern, drinking hall, gaming den, and bordello he passed, shouting, “Captain Barbossa!” and giving a quick glance inside.

The most polite response he received was, “*Who*?” Usually it was some variation on that theme, accompanied by various curses and suggestions that were anatomically unlikely, if not downright impossible.

He was nearly to the top of the towering hulk of derelict vessels when he found him. Jack flung open the door to Fanny’s brothel, gave a quick, abstracted “G’morning, love,” to Fanny herself, who was sitting in her parlor, alone, wrapped in a flouncy negligee and eating an apple. She looked up in surprise, rouge smeared, hair hanging in her eyes, but said nothing as he thrust aside the rug hanging over the next door as a token privacy screen, and ducked to

enter a narrow corridor. Tiny rooms opened off it. Jack began opening them, sticking his head into each one, and then pulling it back out with a quick, “Sorry, wrong room.”

Most of the male occupants didn’t even wake up.

Jack opened the door to the last chamber but one, stuck his head in, then, with a pleased “Ah!” inserted the rest of himself. He’d recognized the enormous old cartwheel of a battered hat from the tangle of clothing dumped beside the bed. “Captain Barbossa!” he cried, verifying the identity of his sleeping quarry. “Wake up!”

Barbossa’s plump, copper-haired bedmate sat up, squeaking in surprise, then began fumbling to pull the sheet up over her ample charms, thus effectively diverting Jack’s attention for a crucial moment. He didn’t realize the bed’s other occupant had roused until the tip of a sword blade touched his Adam’s apple and a gravelly West Country accent growled, “I’m Barbossa, and I don’t think ye’ll be the one givin’ the orders here, boy. Not if ye want to keep breathin’. Now who *are* ye, boy?”

Jack swallowed reflexively, trying not to move his throat much, and rolled his eyes away from the captain’s bedmate —who had finally succeeded in yanking up the sheet—to the man before him. He essayed a tentative smile. “Good morning, Captain Barbossa. I’m Jack Sparrow. We met last month, remember? I…I have important news for you.”

“Ye do, do ye?” The tip of the blade didn’t move so much as an inch, as Hector Barbossa sat up in the bed.

Jack couldn’t nod, because of the sword tip, so he said, in his most earnest tones, “Yes, I do, Captain. Very important. You need to hear this. Quickly.”

“Jack Sparrow…” Barbossa’s weathered features, beneath his grizzled, graying hair, frowned slightly. “I remember ye now. They say Captain Teague is yer—”

“Yes,” Jack interrupted hastily, “Captain Teague commands *Troubadour*; it’s his ship I serve on.” Greatly daring, he put up a finger, and very lightly touched the edge

of the blade. “I’m unarmed, Captain. So, if you wouldn’t mind…” He mimed pushing the sword aside. He didn’t want a split finger.

Barbossa growled, low in his throat, but grudgingly moved the blade to one side a crucial few inches.

A plump, good-natured face, topped by fetching coils of copper hair, appeared over the captain’s shoulder. “Oh, Jack, it’s *you*. I almost didn’t recognize you with your clothes…” She broke off, giggling. “Good morning, love.”

“I’d forgotten how delectable you look in the morning, Sophie,” Jack said, gallantly. He kissed two fingers at her, sending her off into another fit of good-natured giggles.

Barbossa ostentatiously cleared his throat. “So why were ye looking for me, Jack Sparrow?”

“Captain.” Jack made as if to lean closer, then mimed pushing the blade aside again. When he was closer to Barbossa’s ear, he breathed, “I believe I’ve found the vessel that sank *Cobra*. I’d like you to come with me and see if you can identify her.”

Barbossa’s reddened eyes widened. With a curse that sounded more like an animal’s snarl, he began donning his clothes. Within moments he was stamping his feet into his tall boots with their folded-over cuffs, while clapping his huge old hat onto his head. Tossing a few coins over his shoulder at Sophie, he strode out of the tiny room without a backward glance, Jack at his heels.

Barbossa paused in the corridor. “What’s the fastest way out of here?” he demanded.

“Follow me, Captain,” Jack said, leading the way.

When they reached The Drunken Lady, Jack motioned the captain to follow him in. “We might be able to see her from here…ah! There!” he pointed out the window, open to catch the morning breeze. “She’s the sloop farthest to port.”

Barbossa stared at *Koldunya*, eyes narrowed. “I see her…Bermuda-rigged sloop…yes. And I can see something bright on her bow…catches the sun…” He blinked, then

shook his head. “Me eyes aren’t what they used to be, Jack. Looks like the same ship, but I can’t be sure. Have ye a spyglass?”

“I do,” Jack said, eagerly, then his face fell. “I left it in the dory,” he admitted. “But we can be there in just a few minutes.”

“Aye, let’s hurry.”

Jack took to his heels, racing past Steve and Marie, who were standing behind the bar, gazing at them, their mouths open with astonishment to see two pirates enter their establishment and *not* order anything to drink.

Barbossa thudded after Jack as the younger man ran through the crowded warrens of Shipwreck City, down, down…until they emerged outside one of the entrances.

Jack didn’t want to call attention to their mission, so he slowed down and headed for the dock at a brisk walk. When they reached the dory, he was relieved to see the leather satchel was still shoved beneath the seat, and, beneath it was the brass cylinder of his spyglass. He yanked it up, then dodged back and forth on the dock until he had a clear line of sight to *Koldunya*. Placing the eyepiece to his eye, he located the ship, then turned the barrel to bring the bow into focus. The brass cannon sprang into his view.

“There she is,” Jack said, pointing, handing the spyglass to Barbossa. “Sight right past that schooner there.”

Barbossa fixed the spyglass to his eye, and moved it slightly, searching to bring the sloop into view. His fingers moved on the barrel, focusing it…focusing…

Jack blinked as he saw the sun flash off something on *Koldunya*’s bow. *What was that?* he wondered, instantly alert.

Barbossa had finally focused in on the sloop. “Aye,” he said. “Riggin’s the same. Looks like the same ship…and on her bow…”

Jack saw the flash again and suddenly realized what it was. Someone on *Koldunya*’s bow was looking at *them*

through a spyglass!

“Damn and blast!” exclaimed Barbossa. “I’d just started to get a look at that brass bow chaser, t’see if it was the same one, but now it’s gone!” He added a string of more colorful terms, one or two in languages Jack didn’t recognize.

Jack grabbed the spyglass, and, after refocusing it, he cursed, too. “There’s something dark covering it now,” he reported. “They’ve hidden it. While you were examining the ship, I saw a flash from a spyglass. Someone aboard the sloop saw us watching them.”

“Didn’t see the bow chaser clear enough to be sure,” Barbossa said. “But that sloop is a dead ringer for the one what sunk me ship *Cobra*—and killed me little Polly. What son of Hades owns that hell-begotten ship?”

Jack grimaced. “That’s *Koldunya*,” he said. “It belongs to Borya Palachnik. The Pirate Lord.”

Barbossa’s eyes widened. “Borya? Can’t be! I’ve known him for years! I’ve gambled with him, gotten drunk with him more times than I can count. He wouldn’t…would he?” Barbossa hesitated for a moment, then slammed his hand down onto the hilt of his sword. “Damn me for a simpleton,” he muttered, half to himself. “The little butcher always did love gold,” he added. “The soulless little blackguard.”

Unable to think of anything to say, Jack merely shrugged.

“Borya favored sloops. Liked vessels that didn’t draw much, and could sail rings around bigger ships. So it all fits, in a way.” He glared at the distant sloop.

“What fits?” an all-too-familiar voice asked.

Jack looked up to see Captain Teague standing there, with Don Rafael just behind him. Esmeralda was standing behind her grandfather.

Barbossa began to explain, and Jack was happy to let him summarize the situation. Teague would certainly believe

Barbossa, an experienced pirate and a captain, long before he'd believe Jack.

When Barbossa reached the end of the comparison between *Koldunya* and the ship that had attacked him, Teague said, "This isn't proof of Borya's guilt. Just having a Bermuda-rigged sloop—even one with a brass bow chaser—proves nothing. It could be coincidence."

Jack, who had stepped back, and was standing behind Barbossa, glanced over at Esmeralda and rolled his eyes.

"Seems like a farfetched set of coincidences t' me," Barbossa said. "I'd like to look Borya in the eye and ask him whether he attacked and sank me ship."

"And do not forget Old Tommy of the One Tooth," Esmeralda said.

"What happened to One Tooth Tommy?" Barbossa barked. "He was part of me crew."

"Jacky boy found him floating in the cove last night," Teague replied. "Face down. He thinks his death wasn't accidental."

Barbossa turned and regarded Jack with eyes that seemed to bore right into him. "Poor old Tommy. He never did get over that night *Cobra* went down. Sent him right round the bend, it did. He was always babbling about having seen the devil aboard that sloop. Is that what he told ye?"

"Yes," Jack replied. "He was drunk, of course."

"Old Tommy was *always* drunk," Barbossa said. "The man could climb riggin' and reef canvas in a blow when he was three sheets to the wind. Never saw him sober."

"He told me he'd seen the devil that night *Cobra* sank," Jack said. "But then he announced that he'd also seen him here, in Shipwreck Cove. That's why I started looking for a Bermuda-rigged sloop." He took a deep breath. "I think someone heard him talking about what he'd seen, and killed him to silence him, later that same night."

Barbossa and Don Rafael traded glances. "Captain Teague," Don Rafael said, "I believe what we've heard just

now justifies a search of Borya's ship."

Teague's seamed, normally impassive features tightened slightly. He glanced at Jack. "What made you decide to go out rowing around the cove today, looking at sloops, boy?" he asked. "And how did you wind up with Don Rafael's dory?"

Jack took a deep breath, trying to think fast, but he wasn't fast enough.

"I loaned Jack my dory, Captain Teague," Esmeralda said. "And when he told me why he wanted to row around, I decided I wanted to go with him. I'm glad I did. Jack wasn't the only one to get a good look at that brass bow chaser. I saw it, too. I think Captain Barbossa has the right to ask some very pointed questions."

Teague's glance flicked to Jack quickly, letting him know he wasn't off the hook, but when he spoke, he merely said, "Very well. Don Rafael, Captain Barbossa…I would like you to accompany me."

A short time later, Jack stood with Esmeralda, watching as Teague's heavily armed men rowed a longboat out to *Koldunya*. "I wonder what they will find," Esmeralda said.

"I'll wager the contents of me sea chest that there won't be a brass bow chaser aboard that sloop," Jack replied, glumly.

Passing the spyglass back and forth, Jack and Esmeralda took turns following the progress of the longboat. When it reached the sloop, Teague stood up in the bow, and, within a minute or two, was addressing Borya. Shortly after, the three captains climbed up the ship's ladder and went aboard.

They were gone for a considerable time. At length they reappeared, and climbed back down the ladder into the longboat. But this time, they had added another man to their party.

"Borya's with them!" Jack said, looking through the spyglass. "They're bringing him back here."

“Let me see!”

While she peered at the longboat, Jack studied the sky, then licked his finger and held it up. “Wind’s changed. It’s picking up. Big storm coming,”

The longboat glided quickly through the water. Seeing that the longboat’s destination was several docks away from the one where they’d tied the dory, Jack and Esmeralda ran to get closer. By the time they reached their destination, Teague and the others had already tied up and debarked. The Keeper gave low-voiced instructions to his men, who scattered. Another armed contingent of Teague’s men climbed into the longboat and began rowing out to the sloop. Jack guessed Teague had dispatched them to make sure *Koldunya* did not weigh anchor and attempt to flee.

Teague led the other captains toward Shipwreck City. By now they’d collected an ever-growing crowd of curious onlookers. Jack and Esmeralda followed the crowd, trying to get closer, listening.

“Teague’s apparently called for an official court of inquiry,” Jack said to Esmeralda, low-voiced. “Evidence will be presented to the Pirate Lords here at Shipwreck Cove.”

By now it was early afternoon. Jack and Esmeralda followed the crowd inside Shipwreck City. Teague led the way. “He’s heading for the Great Chamber,” Jack said, when they stayed on the first level of the warren. “Here, I know a shortcut.”

Grabbing her hand, he led her off down an alley so narrow they had to squeeze sideways, then down several empty corridors. Finally, he reached a door. Two of Teague’s men were already there, standing guard. Jack nodded to them, and they opened the doors, admitting the young pirate scions into a large, oval chamber that held a raised dais at one end. In the middle of the dais stood a battered “lectern” made from half a ship’s door, mounted on a thick chunk of a mast at the proper height for a speaker. Several

long benches, perhaps liberated from churches, stood in rows on each side of the dais.

The chamber was obviously the hollowed-out holds of two large vessels placed side by side. Overhead, one could still see the curved ribs that had been supports for the old planking and decks. Huge old masts, sawed in half, served as pillars to hold up the ceiling.

Ancient benches and chairs filled the rest of the chamber, randomly scattered, leaving a broad aisle running up the middle. Jack guided Esmeralda over to the side of the second row. “We should be out of the way, here, but still get a good view,” he said.

“Do you think you’ll have to give testimony?” she asked.

Jack shrugged. “Not if Teague has anything to say about it.” Hearing an edge of bitterness in his own voice, Jack shrugged and laughed, lightening the moment. “Who knows?”

As they waited for the Pirate Lords to assemble, Jack and Esmeralda shared some bread and cheese from her satchel, and uncorked the bottle of wine.

Within a few minutes, the chamber started to fill. Pirates, tavern wenches—anyone and everyone was admitted to the chamber, though no weapons were permitted. Pirate society was democratic, though it did have its own form of “aristocracy,” evidenced by the Pirate Lords, who entered with their guards. The guards were unarmed, too, but each of them was a bruiser that Jack wouldn’t have cared to meet in an alley—or on the heaving deck of a ship during a battle.

Mistress Ching, Pirate Lord of the Pacific, Villanueva, Pirate Lord of the Adriatic Sea, and Don Rafael, Pirate Lord of the Caribbean, entered the chamber. Captain Teague, who was Pirate Lord of Madagascar, as well as Keeper of the Code, entered last, with Borya Palachnik. Two guards flanked the Pirate Lord of the Caspian Sea, though Borya wasn’t under restraint.

Teague took his place behind the lectern, and nodded to the burly guard accompanying him. With a grunt, the guard hefted a huge old book, the size of a small hatch cover, onto the top of the lectern. Dust drifted into the air when the book thudded into place.

Then Teague gave a low whistle.

“Why did he do that?” Esmeralda whispered to Jack.

Jack smiled and held a finger to his lips. “Wait,” he whispered.

A minute or so later, a dust-colored mongrel came trotting down the central aisle, holding a ring of jingling keys in its mouth.

Esmeralda looked at Jack, shrugging and turning her hands up in a very Latin gesture of incomprehension. Jack chuckled. “That’s Teague’s prison dog,” he murmured, into her ear, enjoying the brush of silken hair against his nose. “He keeps the keys to everything, including the dungeons, for Teague. I grew up with that mutt…it was one of my chores to feed him. Dog has a taste for rum—but only the good stuff.”

“You grew up with—” Esmeralda looked from Jack to the dog and shook her head. “How *old* is that dog?”

Jack breathed a laugh. “I was gone for several years when I was in my teens,” he said. “Teague must have gotten a new dog during that time. But I swear, this one looks and acts exactly the same as the mutt he had when I was a just a little shaver.”

Esmeralda obviously didn’t know whether to laugh or not.

The prison dog trotted up to his master, and reared up against the lectern, presenting the keys. Gravely, Teague removed the ring from the dog’s mouth and unlocked the massive book. Then he handed the ring back to the dog.

“That book is the Pirate’s Code,” Jack said. “Some of it goes way back.”

Teague solemnly knocked a small cannonball against the top of the lectern. Silence fell immediately in the chamber. “The question has been raised,” he said, “regarding whether the Pirate Lord of the Caspian Sea has broken the Code by knowingly targeting and sinking other pirate ships. This inquiry will hear evidence to discover the truth. I call as first witness—Captain Hector Barbossa.”

Barbossa stood up from his seat in the first row, and approached the dais. Mounting the step up, he stood and gave Borya a long, searching glance, then turned his back on the little pirate to address the Pirate Lords and the assembly. The captain summarized the story of what had happened to him and his ship, then spoke of how his memory of the attacking vessel exactly matched the ship Borya called *Koldunya*. He mentioned being told of the brass bow chaser, and seeing something shining on the bow of Borya’s ship, then added that he was unable to confirm it was the same weapon that had caused such destruction to his *Cobra*.

Barbossa went on to say that, although he, Don Rafael, and Captain Teague had searched the sloop from the bilges on up, they’d found no sign of any brass weapons. “She did have a bow chaser, right enough,” the captain concluded. “But it were a regular iron nine-pounder, painted black.”

Jack watched Borya as he sat on the opposite side of the dais, between the two guards. The undernourished little pirate appeared the same as always, with his wispy gray hair and beard, spectacles hanging around his neck, and his odd clothing. He listened to what was being said with interest, but he did not appear in the least worried or concerned. He looked so normal that Jack found himself wondering whether it *was* all just coincidence. Maybe Borya *was* innocent?

When Barbossa had finished with his testimony, Teague nodded to him, and he returned to his seat. “I call as second witness—Jack Sparrow.”

Jack was relieved to know that Teague wasn't going to just dismiss Old Tommy's death as unrelated. Still, it was strange to mount that dais in front of all those eyes. When he reached the spot opposite Teague, the Keeper of the Code nodded at him to begin.

Looking out over the crowd would only add to his unease, and Jack didn't want to look at Teague, of course. Or Borya, either. He couldn't help remembering all the times he'd spent with the Russian pirate aboard his assorted *Koldunya*s, picking up pocket money by doing chores. Borya would always ruffle his hair and praise him for being a smart boy. Jack hadn't received much in the way of approval while he was a lad, and those words had stayed with him.

Taking a deep breath, Jack fixed his eyes on Esmeralda. Looking at her made him feel as though he could get through this, and that he'd be fine. He launched into his account of running into Old One Tooth Tommy, realizing who he was, then actually *listening* to what the drunken old pirate was ranting on about.

Then he told of how he'd looked for Tommy the next day—and the next—without finding him, or finding anyone who had seen him. Finally, he finished by recounting how he'd seen the body floating in the black water of the cove—and of the conclusions he'd reached after pulling the corpse out and examining it.

When he'd finished, Teague said, "Can anyone confirm your account that you met and spoke with One Tooth Tommy?"

"Yes," Jack responded, steadily. "Captain Christophe de Rapièr of *La Vipère* came to the back of the room to get me when it was time to escort Lady Esmeralda Maria Consuela Anna de Sevilla back to her grandfather's vessel, *Venganza*. The Lady Esmeralda was present, and saw me speaking to old Tommy."

Teague looked out across the crowd. "Is Captain de Rapièr present?" he called, raising his voice so it carried.

“I don’t see him, Captain Teague,” Jack said.

“Very well. Lady Esmeralda,” Teague turned to where she was sitting on the side of the chamber. “Is his account accurate?”

She rose in her place. “I could not hear what was being said,” she spoke steadily, “but I saw Jack Sparrow sitting with Old Tommy of the One Tooth, talking, just as he reported.”

“Thank you, Lady Esmeralda,” Teague said. He turned back to Jack, and Jack suddenly realized what he was about to ask. *Damn Teague! He’d do anything he could to make me look bad in Esmeralda’s eyes. He bloody well* ***knows*** *who I was with! She came to get him last night!*

“Can anyone confirm what you reported regarding finding Tommy’s body?” Teague asked.

Jack took a long breath. “Yes,” he said, keeping his voice steady and free of anger with an effort. He realized he was clenching his fists, and forced himself to uncurl his fingers. “Melinda was with me when I found the body.”

“Melinda?”

“She works for Granny Martha,” Jack replied. He was afraid to look at Esmeralda, so he unfocused his eyes and stared at nothing.

“Is Melinda present?” Teague called out.

There was a rustle several rows back, and then Jack saw Melinda standing there. The trollop curtsied low to Captain Teague. He was, after all, the equivalent of pirate royalty. “I’m Melinda, sir.”

“Was this account correct?”

“Aye, ’tis, sir. Jacky found the body floatin’ just as he says he did. Horrible sight, it were, sir.”

“Very well.” Teague inclined his head to Jack. “Now, describe the events of today.”

Jack reported how he’d gone out rowing in the dory with Esmeralda, looking for evidence that Tommy had actually seen “the devil’s ship” anchored in Shipwreck Cove. He

finished by confirming that he'd clearly seen the brass bow chaser.

Teague again asked Lady Esmeralda whether Jack's account was accurate. Jack was afraid to look at her when she stood up, but as she began to speak, he forced himself to meet her eyes across the chamber. "Yes, Captain Teague," she said, steadily, "Jack Sparrow reported exactly what happened today. I looked through the spyglass too, and I clearly saw a brass bow chaser on *Koldunya*'s bow."

When she finished speaking, she gave Jack a faint smile. He smiled back, light-headed with relief. Teague nodded curtly at Jack when she finished. "You may step down."

Jack went back to his seat. As he settled in beside her, he looked at her and whispered, "I…I thought you might be…angry…"

She met his gaze. "Jack, you keep forgetting. I'm a pirate. I know pirates. Now hush. I want to listen!"

Teague was speaking to the assembled crowd. "Is there anyone present who saw or spoke to One Tooth Tommy after he left The Drunken Lady on the night in question?"

There was a shuffling in the back of the chamber, and then a tall, skinny, ferret-faced man wearing a black eye patch was standing there. "I saw him, I did," he said. "I knowed it was Old One Tooth Tommy, seein' as how we was shipmates, you know."

Jack, who had turned around in his seat, like the rest of the assembly, narrowed his eyes as he took in the man sitting next to the speaker. It was that repugnant manikin… what had Melinda called him? Pintel, that was it.

"State your name," Teague commanded.

"Ragetti, sir," the pirate said. "I sails with Cap'n Barbossa."

"What did you see, Ragetti?" Teague asked.

"I seen Old One Tooth, I did. I was lookin' for me friend, Pintel—" he looked down at the bald pirate next to him, who gave him an excited glance and grinned broadly. "And I seen

him. Tommy was walking…well, more like *lurchin*' y'know, behind someone. They was headed down the corridor, the one what leads out of Shipwreck City to the docks."

"Who was with him?"

"Dunno, mate," said Ragetti, then at a glance from Teague, the one-eyed pirate swallowed and amended, "Uh, *sir*. He was ahead of Old Tommy, mostly through the door when I seen 'em. I didn't get a good look. Tall as me, I think. He were wearing a hat, and it was night, so I couldn't see his face. What I mostly saw was his coat sleeve as he held the door for Tommy to follow him. Pretty color. Turquoise, they calls it. Like a lagoon. Ladies, they like to wear that color." He giggled. "'Cept of course, this was a man's coat. Sir."

Jack rolled his eyes. *Great. In the country of blind fools, the one-eyed idiot is king.*

"Thank you; you may be seated," Teague said. He turned to Borya. "You have heard the evidence presented. What do you have to say?"

Borya stood up. He shook his head regretfully. "I say I am innocent, Captain Teague. I am victim here, not Barbossa. Victim of malice and lies. Those two," he indicated Jack and Esmeralda, "are lying, *da*? Why, I know not. Perhaps boy took girl off to make loving with her. Afterward she is afraid to be caught by Don Rafael, so they lie about why they are out rowing in dory. I only know I have no brass bow chaser aboard my vessel, never had, never, no matter what young bastard and pretty strumpet claim."

A murmur ran through the assembly. Up on the dais, Don Rafael tried to lunge to his feet, only to be pulled back down by Villanueva and Mistress Ching. Jack felt himself coloring—especially when he remembered what he'd been thinking that morning after he and Esmeralda had kissed. But, dammit, they hadn't done anything! He glared up at the little Pirate Lord, wishing he had his pistol. *Borya, you sodding liar!*

Esmeralda didn’t blush. She went pale with fury, right down to her lips, which were pressed tightly together.

Teague banged the cannonball for quiet. As soon as it was restored, Borya spoke again. “As for this Old Tommy… hah! Ridiculous! Old drunk falls into cove and drowns. Is not first time, will not be last time. And anyone here who wishes to call Borya Palachnik *tall*, that person may borrow my spectacles, *da*?” He took off his specs and waved them in the air.

A murmur of laughter ran through the chamber. Jack and Esmeralda didn’t join in, nor did the Pirate Lords.

Borya continued, as soon as it died down. “You say Borya is evil rogue pirate because he has Bermuda-rigged sloop, *da*? Hah! How many Bermuda-rigged sloops in this world, I ask you? Hundreds…maybe thousands, Captain Teague, Keeper of Code. You know this. So do I. As for Captain Barbossa…Hector, you have been my friend many years. I am sorry you lost *Cobra*. Sorrow, they say, can affect the mind. Loss of your beloved vessel has made your mind…what do they say…unhinged. Sorry I am for your suffering, Hector, my friend. But is not my doing.”

Borya sat back down on his bench, crossing his arms on his chest, to all appearances completely relaxed, even bored, by the proceedings.

Silence reigned.

For once Teague seemed uncertain of what to do next. He stared down at the *Code of the Brethren* book, as if it might give him some answer, but he did not open it. Finally, the Keeper turned to the Pirate Lords. “What say you?” he asked.

Don Rafael rose to his feet. “We must get to the truth of this,” he said. “The reputation of the Brethren Court—and my granddaughter—depends on our finding the truth and dealing with those who have flouted the Code. I believe extreme measures are called for. There is one who will know the truth. We must summon *him*.”

Jack looked questioningly at Esmeralda, and she returned the glance. After a moment they both shrugged.

Teague regarded Don Rafael for a long moment. “There is precedent,” he allowed.

Mistress Ching said, forcefully, “The first Brethren Court made the alliance with Captain Jones, and that right has been passed down through the ages, to the assembled Pirate Lords. I was present when Jones was summoned, many years ago. It is not something we should do lightly. Does this situation warrant a summoning?”

“I believe it does,” Don Rafael said, stoutly. “These rogue pirates threaten our freedom, our way of life. They have brazenly defied the Code. We must act.”

Jack glanced at Borya and saw that the little Pirate Lord was sitting there, still expressionless, but now he could see tension bunching the muscles in his jaw and the cords in his neck. He was pale, and his face shone greasily in the light of the lamps. *He’s sweating*, Jack realized.

Teague regarded the other Pirate Lords. “Let the majority rule. Don Rafael votes aye. What say you, Mistress Ching? Villanueva?”

Villanueva wiped his face on his sleeve. “He could give us the answer, there is no doubt,” he said. “But to call him here…” He trailed off, and shuddered.

Don Rafael leaned over and said something to him privately. Villanueva looked unhappy, but then said, steadily enough, “Upon reflection, I vote aye.”

Mistress Ching pursed her lips. “Perhaps it is because I have experienced his presence before, as Villanueva has not, or perhaps it is because I cannot see him…” She smiled grimly. “But I believe that if one of us has broken the Code, we *must* know. I vote aye.”

Teague nodded. “I agree, and also vote aye. We will summon Davy Jones. But to do so, we must reconvene aboard *Troubadour*. He cannot set foot on dry land, save for once every ten years.” The captain turned to his guards.

“Bring Captain Palachnik.” Then he addressed the assembly. “All witnesses, you are ordered to accompany us. The rest of you, remain behind.”

Jack and Esmeralda fell in at the end of the procession that left the Great Chamber, behind Melinda and the one-eyed Ragetti. As they made their way through the corridors, Esmeralda grabbed Jack’s arm, and he could feel her nails even through the fabric of his shirtsleeve. Her voice was harsh, filled with apprehension, though she kept it low. “*Dios mio*! I can hardly believe what I just heard in there, Jack. *Davy Jones?* Have they all gone *mad*?”

“They sounded sane to me,” Jack said, dryly. “But, then, I believe in Davy Jones.”

“You *do*?” she was amazed. “Have you seen him? You are saying that there is a *real* Davy Jones, that he is not just a sailor’s legend? Not merely a…what is the English term…a figure of speech?”

“I’ve never seen him, but he’s real,” Jack replied softly. “I’ve heard too many sailors talk about seeing his ship in bad storms. But I have no idea why they want him to testify, or why he’s in some kind of agreement with the Pirate Lords.”

Esmeralda’s dark eyes were wide. “Davy Jones…is real?”

Jack nodded. “He is. He sails on some kind of ghost ship. The *Flying Dutchman*.”

She thought for a moment. “But Davy Jones…that is not a Dutch name.”

Jack shrugged. “Maybe he stole the ship? Your guess is as good as mine.”

As they stepped out of Shipwreck City, into the open air, Jack realized that his prediction of a storm rising was coming true. Cool wind gusted against him, and when he glanced at the water in the cove, it was white-capped.

By the time the group reached *Troubadour*, rain was beginning to spatter. Teague led them up the gangplank, then down the ladder to the relative shelter of his gun deck.

Even though the gun ports were open, the sky had grown so dark they could barely see to make their way down. Teague's men quickly lit lanterns, hanging them on hooks. Even anchored, the ship was rocking back and forth. Outside, cold rain began pelting down, occasionally blowing in through the open gun ports. Jack and Esmeralda sat down on the barrel of one of the portside cannons, out of the way. In the center of the deck, Teague gestured for the Pirate Lords to form a circle. Jack repressed a shiver as he recalled some of the conjuring rites he'd seen Tia Dalma perform. What would this bit of magic be like? He listened intently.

"Are we ready?" Teague said, and each Pirate Lord nodded assent. "Begin." In the flickering lamplight of the swaying deck, the four Pirate Lords spoke quietly, in unison, "Davy Jones…we, the Pirate Lords of the Brethren Court, call you. By our alliance giving us power over the sea, binding the queen in her bones, we entreat you. Come to us, Davy Jones. We summon you. We summon you. We summon you."

Through the open gun port to Jack's left came an eye-searing flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by a huge clap of thunder. Esmeralda started. Jack blinked—

—and when he opened his eyes again, Davy Jones was present, standing in a pool of shadow between gun ports. It was as though he'd always been there.

Jack heard Esmeralda gasp, then felt her tremble. He put his arm around her, drawing her against him. The gesture was made in all innocence; seeking only to give, and receive, simple human comfort, in the presence of something monstrous.

Davy Jones was monstrous.

Jack had seen some pretty weird manifestations in his life, mythical beings, ghosts, and eldritch creatures that seemed to have come from realms no human had ever trod. But none of them had prepared him for Davy Jones.

That face…it was a face out of some opium eater's worst nightmare. It was as though a man had stretched the

skin of a squid and thrust his face into it so deeply that the human features—eyes, nose, mouth—were molded through the sea-creature's flesh. Tube-like tentacles writhed down from the lower half of his face, in a bizarre parody of a man's beard. He wore a hat, and ragged, once elegant, clothing, but the garments could not disguise the fact that Jones's limbs were as distorted as his face. His right leg and left arm terminated in claws, like those of a lobster. His right arm ended in, not a hand, but a writhing mass of tentacles. Only his booted left leg seemed human-shaped.

There was no sound on the gun deck save for the crash and boom of the storm outside.

Jones stepped forward, into the light of the lantern, his human foot thumping in its heavy boot, his claw landing with a click. Esmeralda pressed her hand to her mouth, but made no sound. Someone—Jack thought it must have been Villanueva—moaned softly. The tall, skinny Ragetti gibbered quietly. In a sudden rustle of skirts, Melinda fainted, collapsing onto the deck.

The monster spoke. "I am here." Jack listened to the voice with amazement. It was human. Jones spoke with a thick accent. Scots, Jack realized.

Teague moved a step or two forward. "Thank you for honoring our summons, Captain Jones," he said. "We Pirate Lords face possible treason in our numbers. You are lord of the sea, so we know you will be able to tell us"—the Keeper of the Code waved a hand at Borya, who was restrained from bolting by the guards' hold—"whether this man, Borya Palachnik, has been committing wanton slaughter on the seas…sending you many souls."

Jones moved over to face Borya…thump, click…thump, click…thump, click. He halted, leaning forward, tentacles writhing, barely a foot away from Borya, who cringed backward. Pale-faced, the brawny guards held him fast.

Several of Davy Jones's facial tentacles stretched out toward the scrawny Pirate Lord, as if somehow they could

scent him. Jones abruptly nodded. “Yes,” he said, turning back to Teague. “He is the one. He has sent me many dead for more than a year now. He commands others. There are seven captains under his command, and they all send me souls. Mercy is something they know not. Their ships bring only death.”

Don Rafael stepped forward. “We thank you for your assistance, Captain Jones. Borya has broken the Code, and yet he dared to dock his ship in the cove. We will send him to join you, and soon.”

“Good,” said Jones, biting off the word as though the thought was a tasty treat.

Jack had no idea that he’d even moved until he found himself on his feet, only a few feet away from Davy Jones’s back. In some ways, the back was as bad as the front, because the hood of the squid lay flopped over Jones’s collar, pulsing gruesomely. Jack cleared his throat. “Excuse me, um, Captain Jones. What about the brass bow chaser?” he heard himself saying. “What did Borya do with it?”

Jones whirled around—he moved fast for such a huge, towering figure. His eyes focused on Jack in a burning glare. Jack forced himself to remain still, feeling as though his soul was laid bare for those eyes to examine—and sneer at. “Who are you?” Jones demanded.

“I’m Jack Sparrow,” Jack replied, amazed that his voice emerged almost normally. “I was—am—a witness in this matter. Captain Jones, you know what happened to that cannon, I’m sure, because you know everything that happens in your domain.”

Jones nodded, almost grudgingly, still studying Jack, seeming surprised that the young man had the nerve to stand there and ask him a question. “You are correct, young Sparrow,” Jones said, after a second. “Captain Palachnik’s brass bow chaser now lies at the bottom of Shipwreck Cove.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jack said, finally allowing himself to back away. He almost stepped on Melinda, who was beginning to stir, so he crouched down, helping her to sit up. She took one look at Jones, then buried her face in her hands and didn’t move.

Don Rafael spoke up again. “We all thank you, Captain Jones, for coming to us today, to help us find the Code-breaker and traitor among us. We will deal with him, and seek out the others who operate under his command.”

“They are to be found on many seas, dealing death,” Jones said. “Except for the other one who is currently present here, in Shipwreck Cove.”

“Another Code-breaker? In Shipwreck Cove?” Even Teague betrayed emotion—surprise and dismay.

“Aye,” Jones said. “That one sent me the one you call Tommy, two nights ago.”

“What is his name, Captain Jones?” Don Rafael asked.

“He is not present,” Jones said. “If he were, I could tell you his name. I know only the ship he sails, when he sends me dead. A fine brigantine.”

Jack looked up at Davy Jones, his breath catching in his throat. A brigantine? *La Vipère* was a brigantine, and a fine ship she was. But she was just one of perhaps half a dozen such vessels currently moored or anchored in Shipwreck Cove. *Jones can’t mean Christophe*, he reassured himself, and glanced over at Esmeralda, seeing his own thoughts reflected in her expression.

Jack looked back at Davy Jones, just as the monstrous figure turned away from the humans. It took one stride. Thump, click.

Then, between one moment and the next, Jones was, simply…not there anymore. Vanished. Gone.

Teague turned to face Borya. “Boris Palachnik,” he said. “This Court of Inquiry finds that you and your crew have broken the Code of the Brethren. The Code is the law. The penalty for all of you is death.” The Keeper of the Code

paused for a second, then said, “This Court of Inquiry is concluded.”

Jack stood up, then motioned to the trembling Ragetti to assist Melinda to her feet. Walking back over to Esmeralda, he stood beside her. Neither of them spoke. He looked out the open gun port, seeing that the sky was growing lighter. The rumble of thunder was now muted by distance. The storm was in retreat.…

A gust of cool wind caressed Jack’s face. He blinked, realizing he’d been standing there, steering the *Wicked Wench*, lost in memory. Looking to his left, he saw a faint lightening in the eastern horizon, and was reminded again of that time on *Troubadour*’s gun deck.

For a moment he could almost feel the way Esmeralda had openly clutched his hand, still so shaken that she hadn’t cared who saw her doing it. Don Rafael had seemed to understand, because he’d stopped and spoken to his granddaughter. “I am sorry you had to see this, *corazón*.”

“I am all right,” Esmeralda had replied, her voice, steady. “I am glad we now know the truth.”

Don Rafael had then turned to Jack. “*Señor* Sparrow… Teague dismisses you as a mere boy,” he’d said, gazing at him thoughtfully. “But I disagree. Only a man could have stood his ground and heard Davy Jones speak his name.” He’d inclined his head to Jack in a gesture of genuine respect, and then walked away.

Jack sighed. So many memories…some good, some bad, and so many that were bittersweet. He glanced east again. Dawn was on its way.

The remainder of the trip back to Calabar was uneventful. Jack continued to train his crew, so they’d be prepared in case of a pirate attack. The constant drilling of the gun crews was paying off in faster loading and better aim. And

the entire crew practiced several times a week with hand weapons, so they could load and fire pistols, as well as handle a cutlass. They still fought like merchant sailors, not trained soldiers, but they were improving. Lucius Featherstone and Etienne de Ver, who had both seen action while in their respective armies, proved very useful to Jack's efforts, once he enlisted them as instructors—as long as he was careful to keep them far enough apart that they didn't wind up dueling with each other over some fancied slur, something that happened more than once.

The unrelenting heat continued as the ship rounded the bulge of Africa and turned east. Several times, Jack wound up hanging a hammock on deck and sleeping in it. On the afternoon of their last full day of sailing, as they came within spyglass view of the coastline, Jack suddenly decided there was no need to rush into Calabar Harbor after dark. He gave the order to reef sails and drop anchor.

He and Robby stood there, watching the crew busy themselves with the anchor and the sails. The *Wicked Wench* came to a halt, and the crew climbed down from the rigging.

"We'll anchor out tonight," Jack said. "Give the men a chance to rest up, then sail into Calabar tomorrow morning, when everyone's fresh and it's not so bloody hot."

"Don't count on it being any better tomorrow," Robby said, loosening his neckcloth. Removing his tricorne, he fanned himself vigorously with it. "I hope we can get loaded and back out to sea quickly. Calabar town is going to feel like a stewpot, with us as the solid bits."

Jack laughed. "I fear you're right, Robby. But for now… captain's privilege. I'm declaring myself on leave, and I'm going to cool off." He walked purposefully over to the railing, where he began shucking his clothes.

Robby followed him. "You're going in?"

"Yes. Lower a ladder and post an armed watch, in case anyone spots any bloody sharks. I haven't had a good swim

in two months, and I’m spoiling for it.” Unbuttoning his sweat-damp shirt, he pulled it off and dropped it onto the growing pile of clothes, as Robby gave the order.

Jack waited until the ladder was dropped and the crewman posted with a musket, before he stripped off the rest of his clothes and climbed up onto the railing. “Besides,” he added, over his shoulder, “maybe this will save me from having to take another bloody bath, if Mr. Beckett takes it into his head to invite me to lunch again.”

With a swift, graceful motion, he dived off the rail.

Jack hit the blessed coolness of the water and it was a benediction. Tossing his hair out of his eyes, he waved up at his crew. “It’s great!” he shouted. “Come on!”

Few of his crew could swim, but several of the men, including Robby, did climb down the ladder. Jack was pleased to see Chamba paddling around, with Robby and Second Mate Connery coaching him on how to move his arms and avoid getting water up his nose.

Jack swam a little distance away, his strokes strong and powerful. Following an impulse he hardly questioned, he surface-dived, stroking down into the water, feeling it grow colder the farther he swam from the sun. It was a different world, he thought, opening his eyes, and peering down. Down there, it was cold, and the pressure could pop a man’s eardrums—or even his lungs, if he were foolish enough to dive too deep.

This was Davy Jones’s realm. Jack remembered that face, and those words the Pirate Lords had spoken. The legends said that if a man were dying out here, on the water, that Captain Jones would come to him, and speak his name…just before death.

Jack shuddered suddenly, realizing the blood was pounding in his ears, and that the sunlit surface seemed far away.

Quickly, he reversed direction, and began stroking back for the surface. His head broke the water, and he inhaled a

huge gulp of air, feeling his lungs move, his heart pound. He'd never felt more alive than he did in the water—except perhaps when he was with a woman.

"Captain! *Jack*!" a voice shouted, sounding a bit frantic. He whipped his head around, to see Robby waving at him. He'd managed to swim farther away than he'd thought, and clearly, Robby was getting nervous.

Jack turned around, waved back, then began swimming back to the *Wicked Wench*.

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Chapter Nine
Ayisha

The ***Wicked Wench*** sailed into Calabar Harbor before noon on the fifth of August. As Robby Greene had predicted, the morning was hot—a steamy, airless heat. All morning Jack had stood on the weather deck, envying his hands. All his men, except for the mates, were stripped to the waist. As the ship coasted up to the dock, and the sailors began tossing out the mooring lines, bringing her to a halt, the last bit of breeze from her passage died. Jack felt as though some giant sponge had sucked all of the air out of his lungs. Rebelling in the face of the stifling heat, he pulled off his coat—and then, for good measure, yanked off his neckcloth, too. He stood there, mopping sweat from his forehead with the neckcloth, as his ship's gangplank thudded down onto the East India Trading Company's dock.

Hearing quick steps mounting the gangplank, Jack turned to find Cutler Beckett's assistant, Ian Mercer, standing on his deck. *This is becoming a bloody habit*, he thought, grumpily. *What can he want this time?*

Mercer hurried up to Jack, who nodded at him politely, forcing a smile. "Ah, Mr. Mercer. Hot day, isn't it? What brings you here?"

The operative jerked his head at the gangplank. "Captain Sparrow, Mr. Beckett wants to see you immediately," he said, keeping his voice low. "There's someone he wants you to meet."

Why am I not surprised? Jack thought, barely managing not to roll his eyes. "I have responsibilities here," he pointed

out. “Cargo unloading to oversee, and shore leave rosters to —”

“Mr. Beckett sent me down here the moment he heard your sails had been sighted, Captain,” Mercer said. “It’s urgent that you come immediately.”

Jack sighed. “Very well. I suppose I should go change my clothes? Put on those nice ones Mr. Beckett supplied last time he invited me to his house?”

“Unnecessary,” Mercer said. “This will not be a social occasion.”

By now Jack was growing decidedly curious. “I see. All right, I’ll come as soon as I’ve given my first mate instructions.”

As he spoke to Robby, Jack glanced over at Mercer, to see the operative restlessly pacing the weather deck beside the gangplank. Seeing Jack looking at him, Mercer imperiously gestured toward the gangplank. Jack cursed softly, careful to keep his mouth turned away. For all he knew, Mercer could read lips. “As you can see,” he told Robby, “I’m desperately wanted. They probably asked Lord Penwallow to take a damned bath, and they need me to scrub his lordship’s sodding back.”

Robby chuckled softly. “You’d better go, Jack. You know I can handle things here.”

“I do know it,” Jack said, clapping Robby on the shoulder. He picked up his coat and hat, but didn’t put them on. “Requisition some wine or beer from the EITC,” he said, “and a hogshead of fresh water to cut it with. Make anyone working in this oven drink a flagon every hour or so. Don’t want them passing out from the heat.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

Jack was assailed by a sense of déjà vu as he headed up the hill into Calabar, trying to pick up his pace, and get rid of the sense that the earth was rolling beneath his feet. “So who does Mr. Beckett want me to meet this time?” he asked

the taciturn Mercer. “Oh, and I’m clean,” he added, feeling defensive. “Went for a lovely swim yesterday.”

For the first time since he’d met him, the dour Scot’s mouth quirked in what might have been either a grimace or a smile. “The person Mr. Beckett wants you to meet wouldn’t know or care whether you’d had a bath,” he said. “Personally, I believe the creature is half-witted.”

Jack raised his eyebrows at that one. Mercer volunteered nothing else, however.

They reached the top of the hill, and entered Beckett’s town house.

Jack mopped sweat from his face on his sleeve, then, with a groan of protest, donned his coat and retied his neckcloth. “I suppose you wouldn’t have anything to drink handy,” he said. “Me tongue feels like a strip cut from a cat.”

“Fur?” Mercer said, obviously uncomprehending.

“No, mate, leather. A cat o’ nine tails,” Jack explained. “Used for floggings at sea. Nasty things.” He shuddered. “I prefer dunking as a means of enforcing discipline. Works every time, and they hardly ever drown.”

Mercer gave him a sharp glance, obviously wondering whether Jack was joking, but Jack was careful not to betray any expression.

“Oh, very well,” the operative said. “Mistress Goodwright?”

Moments later, the housekeeper bustled into view. “Oh, Mr. Mercer, ’tis you,” she said, drying her hands on her apron. “And, Captain *Sparrow*! Lovely to see you! Hope you’re well.” She bobbed one of her little half curtsies at Jack, her plump cheeks pink.

“I am well, thank you,” Jack said, giving her a bob of a bow, “but I confess myself to be absolutely parched, madam. Might you have something I could drink, before I go up to talk to Mr. Beckett, who is, apparently, expecting me?”

“Of course, of course!” She scurried away, to return a few minutes later carrying a tall glass full of dark liquid. Jack took a gulp, expecting it to be beer or ale, and only just managed not to spray it all over Mr. Beckett’s wallpaper. He swallowed the mouthful, realizing it was English tea, tepid and quite strong.

“Mr. Beckett drinks it that way,” Mistress Goodwright said, noticing his expression. “He has me make it with boiling water, and then just set it aside to steep. He says in England they drinks it over ice in the summer. Have you ever heard the like? I could get you a few lumps of sugar, Captain Sparrow.”

“Not at all, madam,” Jack assured her, and manfully drained the glass. At least it was wet.

Feeling somewhat restored, he followed Mercer upstairs. The operative tapped on the door, gained admission, then opened it to let Jack walk past him. “I’ll be waiting downstairs,” Mercer said, “should you need me.”

Cutler Beckett was sitting behind his fancy desk, and for once there was no work stacked before him. He smiled at Jack as he entered, and gestured him to a seat beside the desk. “Good afternoon, Captain Sparrow. Please take a seat.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Beckett,” Jack said, complying. “I just got back, as I suppose you already know. My men are even now offloading cargo, and I have all the receipts and manifests ready to—”

He broke off, seeing that Cutler Beckett was holding up a hand to stop him.

“Yes, yes, Captain Sparrow,” Beckett said. “I’m sure all is in order, and I’m confident you’ve done your usual commendable job. Did all of Lord Penwallow’s cargo reach New Avalon intact?”

“Yes, Mr. Beckett, it came through fine, and I supervised the delivery to his plantation site myself,” Jack said.

“Excellent,” Beckett said. “Lord Penwallow has another cargo to be delivered, but I believe, in light of what I am about to propose, that I’ll send it out on another vessel. I wouldn’t want to delay its arrival.”

Jack raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

“Captain Sparrow,” Beckett leaned closer and his voice dropped to a confiding level, “actually, we know each other so well after all these months, I feel that I may call you Jack.” The corners of Beckett’s mouth turned up.

Jack was immediately on the alert. *What the bloody hell is he up to?* he wondered. “Of course, Mr. Beckett.”

“Jack,” Beckett repeated, in those familiar, confiding tones, “I have a job for you. A…business proposition. I need your help, and I’m prepared to offer you good terms to partner with me in this venture. You’ll be very well remunerated indeed.”

Jack blinked. He knew what “remunerated,” meant, but he’d never heard anyone use that word in conversation before. “Really, Mr. Beckett? What kind of business proposition are you talking about?”

“Take a look at this,” Beckett said, unlocking his desk drawer. He removed a book, and opened it to a page. Jack instantly recognized it as the J. Ward book, *My Lyfe Amonge the Pyrates*. Then Beckett took out a bag that clinked, and spilled its contents onto the pages of the book.

Jack drew in his breath, and felt his heart speed up. Reaching out, he picked up the pieces of jewelry, one by one —the pectoral, the earrings, the armlets, and all the rest— and turned them over in his fingers, comparing them to the illustrations in the book. “Not ancient,” he said after a moment. “Real gold, real stones…and made within the past ten or twenty years. This is a *royal* pectoral. These weren’t taken from some moldering tomb.”

Cutler Beckett’s gray eyes brightened. “I knew I could count on you to be quick,” he said, approvingly. “Yes, Jack. This jewelry came…” he paused for an expectant beat.

“From Zerzura,” Jack finished for him.

“Correct.”

Jack picked up the earrings, dangling them before his eyes, watching the sunlight flash off the gold and tiny emeralds. “Very nice,” he said. “You’d better start at the beginning.”

He listened intently as Beckett described his search for the source of the jewelry, and then his acquisition of the two slaves—the old man, whom Beckett characterized as a “priest,” who had died when Mercer began to “question” him, and then a female slave, a sewing woman, whom Beckett reported didn’t speak English. “We’ve been unable to get anything out of her at all,” Beckett said. “I showed her the jewelry, and for just a second I thought I saw something, possibly some recognition. But…no, it was just trick of the light. She was as blank as ever.” Beckett sat back in his chair. “And, considering what happened to the old holy man, I was reluctant to let Mercer have a go at her. If she rolled up her eyes and died on us, we’d be nowhere.”

Jack nodded. “This is amazing, Mr. Beckett,” he said. “But where do I come in?”

Beckett folded his hands on the desktop and smiled. *If he keeps smiling like that, his cheek muscles are going to be sore tonight from all the unaccustomed exercise*, Jack thought, cynically.

“Jack, we’ve run out of options with this woman. I fear I am not—and Mercer certainly is not—*charming*. But *you* are, Jack. You have charm in spades. People *like* you, when you exert yourself to be likeable. *Women* like you. I want you to charm this woman into telling us where Kerma is.”

“I doubt anyone is that charming, Mr. Beckett,” Jack said. “If you want people to do things for you, generally you have to offer them something to make it worth their while. At least, that’s been my experience.”

Cutler Beckett waved a negligent hand. “Jack, Jack…of course you’ll offer her something. You’ll offer her escape,

and her freedom—and you'll be convincing. After all, you have a ship, to take her away. It should be easy for you to convince her that you're genuinely going to free her, if she'll just give you the bearings to the lost island."

"So what's in it for me?" Jack asked.

"In return for the bearings to Kerma, and you must verify that they're correct, I'll cut you in for ten percent of the gold we find there."

Jack shook his head, his bargaining nature kicking in. "Not likely I'd do it for that," he said. "Think about it. I'll have to pretend to help her escape from Calabar…and it'll be a real escape, once we leave your property. Risky thing, helping slaves escape. If you'll recall, slave hunters have large, fierce dogs, and they carry pistols. The slave hunters, not the dogs," Jack added. "Then, after we leave Calabar, I'll be the one sailing around out on the ocean, trying to find an island the legends say is hidden by illusion and spells and no doubt other unnatural and eldritch things." Jack shook his head. "Dealing with eldritch things can be more than a bit risky, trust me. And all the while I'm out there risking me life, you sit here, safe in your nice office, behind your lovely ebony and mother-of-pearl desk, drinking tepid tea, safe as houses." He smiled back at his employer. "Forty percent, Mr. Beckett."

Beckett pretended not to hear him. "And besides golden treasure, Jack," he added, "this island will provide a new source of slaves. A whole island full of them! We wouldn't need those loathsome, venal slave traders.

Cut out the middlemen entirely. The man who captured this party said they were armed with mostly *bronze* weapons, with only a few iron ones. No firearms. It'll be child's play to just swoop down and sweep them up. Black gold, Jack. It's a wonderful business opportunity." Cutler Beckett steepled his fingers before him, his eyes shining. "Jack, the New World needs slaves. A black river will be

pouring across the Atlantic for the next hundred years, or I miss my guess."

Jack cleared his throat. "What you do with the people of Kerma is your business, Mr. Beckett, but you know by now I have no interest in the slave trade. I'll stick to nice, shiny, yellow gold." He twirled the earrings again, for emphasis.

"You wouldn't have to offend your delicate nose, Jack," Beckett insisted. "Other captains will haul the wretches. You and I will just sit back and count our profits. Tell you what… I'll give you ten percent of the slave revenue, and twenty from the gold we take. How's that?"

Jack shrugged, careful to keep his features from showing his distaste. He tried not to envision fleets of EITC ships going out, trafficking in human suffering and degradation. "You can keep all of the money from the slaves, Mr. Beckett," he said. "I'll stick to gold. Lasts longer, and is easier to transport. Thirty-five percent. Remember, I'm the one taking the risks." *How much gold **is** there? Enough to buy my own ship and get free of you, that cutthroat Mercer, and your filthy slave trade, Mr. Beckett?*

"Jack…" Beckett smiled tolerantly at him. "How exactly are you planning to reach Kerma? Flap your arms and fly, like the sparrow, your namesake? You'll sail there in *my* ship, remember? Twenty-five percent."

Jack considered. "Is the lady I'm to charm young?" he asked. "Attractive?"

Beckett laughed out loud, but softly. "Sadly, no, Jack," he said. "I doubt there's a voyage long enough a man could take that would make that creature look attractive enough to woo. If you're not discerning, perhaps a bag over her head?" He chuckled. "No, I fear I can't offer the lady's charms as an inducement. How about if we compromise? Thirty percent of the gold revenue for your share."

Jack nodded. "Works for me, as long as you throw in these baubles, here." He indicated the jewelry spread out on

the desk. “Just in case the treasure in the labyrinth turns out to be at a low ebb.”

Beckett picked up the wristlets and twirled them. “Neither of these is the right bracelet, Jack,” he said. “The book says the sacred talisman that unlocks the door is decorated with the head of the lion-god, picked out in stones…stones taken from the Heart itself. Captain Ward doesn’t say anything about where the talisman needed to unlock the door might be found. You won’t be able to get into the labyrinth, much less the treasure room.”

Jack smiled. “There’s always a nice charge of black powder, Mr. Beckett,” he reminded his employer. “That should prove persuasive to just about any door.”

“Good point,” Beckett said. “And then you’d only have the monsters and traps Captain Ward mentions to worry about.”

“That’s why I deserve my thirty percent,” Jack pointed out. “I’ve had some slight experience with eldritch things. Thirty percent of the gold, and all of your little treasure trove here,” he said, indicating the tray. “Do we have an accord?”

Beckett hesitated, then shrugged. “Oh, very well,” he said, and held out his hand. “Done.”

Jack shook it. “Done.”

“Shall we have a toast to our lucrative partnership?” Beckett said.

Jack nodded. “Suits me. I’m parched again.”

Beckett busied himself with glasses and a carafe at the sideboard, while Jack examined the jewelry again, piece by piece. Picking up the earrings, he slid them into the pocket-pouch he wore beneath the waistband of his britches, the same one he used to carry Tia Dalma’s compass. He had another such pocket on the other side where he carried coins.

Beckett came back to the deck and handed Jack a glass of wine. “A particularly fine port,” he said, and raised his

glass in a toast. “To finding Zerzura.”

“To finding Zerzura,” Jack echoed, and sipped. *Presuming I do find it, and I choose to share the location with you…*

When he lowered the glass, Beckett was staring at him, his hand out. “Jack…the earrings, please.”

Jack smiled and shook his head. “Sorry, mate. I’m going to need something from Zerzura to show to the lady, maybe present ’em as a gift, to get a conversation going about her homeland.” He raised his eyebrows at Beckett. “I’ll tell her I light-fingered them from you, when you showed me them to brag. That will set me apart from you and Mercer.”

Beckett pursed his lips, as though he’d tasted a lemon. “Very well, Jack,” he said, grudgingly. “After all, they will be yours when you get—and verify—those bearings. But I tend to think you’re expecting rather a lot from the creature. Mercer is convinced she’s half-witted.” Beckett shrugged. “It’s possible he’s right.”

“So what does she do here in your household?”

“I converted the chamber next door to a sewing room. She spins, weaves, and sews.”

He extended his arm toward Jack. “For example, my new coat and waistcoat. She’s made me several.”

Jack studied Beckett’s attire. His coat was expertly cut and sewn, from very fine-spun, lightweight wool. Like his employer’s other clothes, it was conservative in color and cut—a muted burgundy, with a bit of tasteful, same-color embroidery on the cuffs. The waistcoat was beautifully embroidered, with an abstract design done in red and gold, with touches of lapis blue. He raised his eyebrows. “Impressive. Hard to imagine a ‘half-wit’ could produce something like that.”

“I don’t believe Mercer is correct, frankly, though one does hear of individuals who can accomplish things in one limited area and are otherwise lack-witted.” Beckett poured more port, and sipped from his glass. “My theory is that

Ayisha may be like one of those individuals who has suffered some type of shock that disarranges the humors of the body. One hears of such cases. Some become raving lunatics, others…they simply withdraw. She is of the latter variety." Beckett refilled Jack's glass. "Perhaps it's time for you to meet her. I could take you next door and introduce you."

Jack frowned. "She cannot leave the house?"

"Oh, she can. We haven't allowed her to do so, of course. We didn't want to risk a runaway."

Jack thought for moment. "Mr. Beckett, if I'm to gain her trust, I must appear to be her…savior. Rescuer. The person who will help her escape, yes?"

Beckett nodded.

"Then she cannot see us together. I must meet her elsewhere than your home, or the EITC office. Can she run errands for Mistress Goodwright? Go to the market, something of the sort?"

"Yes, I believe she could manage that," Beckett said.

"Then have Mistress Goodwright start sending her to the market, the way she would send any other servant. Give her daily errands in town. I will take care of the rest. Just tell me how to recognize her."

Beckett smiled. "Look for the ugliest woman you've seen in a very long time. Oh, and also, she always wears an old gray shawl. Always, no matter how hot it is."

Jack nodded. "Got it. I have a crewman who speaks pidgin. I'll use him as translator. I pick up languages quickly, so I might not need him for long."

"How long do you think it will take?"

Jack shrugged. "A week? Ten days? I won't dally in Calabar a moment longer than it takes to get her aboard the *Wench*. This heat is enough to flatten a man."

"Yes," Beckett said. "I usually have the fan cranked in here, but of course our conversation had to be private."

“The *Wicked Wench* will need reprovisioning, of course, and whatever cargo you have for me to transport loaded. If I can get her to give me the bearings quickly, I’ll bring the cargo back here, and you can dispatch it on another ship. The legend says Kerma lies to the north, off this coast.”

“Correct. Make sure you update your navigational charts.”

“Of course,” Jack said, then he thought of something. “Oh, and if I’m to go in search of Kerma, I’ll want twice my usual ration of powder. You never know what you’ll find when you sail in strange waters. And, of course, there’s the door to that labyrinth.”

Beckett nodded. “Very well. I’ll authorize that. And I’ll speak to Mistress Goodwright directly about sending her to the market. Perhaps she can dispatch Ayisha on an errand this very afternoon.”

“I’ll send my crewman to the market this afternoon, tell him to keep a watch for her. He’s a sharp lad, and reliable.”

Beckett smiled at Jack, “Very well. I am sure you will prove worthy of this assignment, Captain Sparrow.”

“I hope so,” Jack said. “Oh, and Mr. Beckett…if I’m to gain her trust, I will have to make this look good. So you may wake up one morning and find the *Wench* is gone, just gone. Departing like that, in the dead of night, secretly, will help convince her that I’m helping her escape. If she has any sense at all, she’d hardly believe she was escaping from you if she could just walk on board openly, at high noon.”

Cutler Beckett nodded. “A good point, Jack.”

“I’ll have me first mate bring the shipping manifests to your secretary in your office, so the record-keeping will be attended to. And, Mr. Beckett, in order to make this look like a proper escape, this had better be the last time we speak together before I go, savvy?”

Beckett nodded agreement. “That’s for the best, Jack. You have my every confidence. As you say, the more she believes you’re opposing us, the more she’ll trust you. And

I’m sure you’ll return to Calabar with the bearings for Kerma.”

Beckett sat back in his ebony chair, sipping his wine, and gave Jack another smile. But there was an edge to this one; it never reached his eyes. “You *are* planning to return, aren’t you, Jack?”

Jack nodded. “I’ll need to return here so we can split up the treasure, Mr. Beckett,” he pointed out. “I mean…we have a gentleman’s agreement.”

“That’s right, we do, Jack.” Beckett picked up the pectoral and ran his fingers over the gold and lapis links. “And just in case you were tempted to do anything other than fulfill our agreement—to the letter, mind you—I should remind you that *I* am Ayisha’s legal owner, as well as the owner of the *Wicked Wench*. Failing to return both those items would constitute theft. And theft of a ship is piracy.” His smile vanished. “I *loathe* pirates, Jack.”

“Most honest people do,” Jack said, putting just the right amount of earnest indignation into his voice. “Any captain worth his pay does everything he can to avoid them, and I count myself among that number.”

“Good,” Beckett said. “I’m glad the idea of theft—or piracy—is anathema to you.”

Jack shifted in his chair, but before he could get up, Beckett held up his forefinger. “Oh, and one more thing. I *do* want you to remember, Jack, that the EITC has more ships than the British Royal Navy. We also have a major presence—if not a controlling interest—in the economy and administration of every major port in the civilized world. Any sailor that runs afoul of the EITC will soon discover that he’s run out of ships to sail, not to mention ports of call where he can do business. That goes double for captains, Jack.”

Jack swallowed, and looked genuinely intimidated, which at the moment didn’t require a great deal of acting. It was a sobering thought. “I grasp your meaning, Mr. Beckett.”

“Good. I’m glad we understand each other. It’s good when business partners understand each other.” Beckett smiled again, a return to the warm, approving smile he’d shown when Jack had entered his office. “I know you like the *Wicked Wench*, Jack. Perhaps you’d like her for your own some day?”

Jack managed to nod.

“That could certainly be arranged. But there’s no denying the *Wench* has a few years on her, Jack. Don’t set your sights too low. As my business partner, you could have any ship you wanted. Just think of that, Jack. Any ship you wanted.”

First the stick, then the bloody carrot, Jack thought. He rose, and nodded to his employer. “I’ll keep that in mind, Mr. Beckett.” He waved at Beckett as the man started to rise. “No, no, don’t get up. Thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Beckett. I’ll see myself out.”

“*Au revoir*, Jack.”

As Captain Sparrow closed the door leading out of Mr. Beckett’s office, Ayisha slowly rose from her cramped crouch before the keyhole, careful not to lose her balance or make any betraying noise.

Straightening her back, feeling the muscles of her haunches and thighs protest, she turned away from the door and walked back to her seat at the sewing table to resume her work. Her fingers moved automatically, stretching fabric, measuring, then marking lines to cut. Occasionally she would rise and drape cloth across the carved wooden clothing form standing in the corner of her room, not far from where she unrolled her sleeping pallet at night.

While she worked, her mind was busy, going over the conversation she had just overheard. So Mr. Beckett had given up on trying to communicate with her, and was counting on Captain Sparrow to accomplish his goal of

convincing her to betray her home? And he was willing to pay him well to get that information? Mr. Beckett must indeed be growing desperate.

Ayisha knew Captain Sparrow, at least by reputation. For months the slaves of Calabar had repeated the story of how he had helped a runaway slave named Chamba escape from a master who had beaten him senseless. Ayisha reflected that this Captain Sparrow must have done so because he'd had an altercation with Chamba's master. *He freed a black man just to spite his enemy. Interesting…*

Ayisha began pinning fabric into place around the wooden form, checking its drape, turning the awkward wooden torso, regarding it from various angles, so she could see how light and shadow played across the fabric.

It was nice to be making a woman's dress again. After she'd made Mr. Beckett several new outfits, he'd told Mistress Goodwright that she could have a few new dresses and aprons made. Ayisha liked Mistress Goodwright. The goodwife had openly praised her work. And, even more valuable, she'd shown Ayisha two new ways of making garments—crocheting and knitting. Neither of those methods of making clothing was known in Zerzura.

As she tugged fabric and pinned, Ayisha wondered whether she'd be here long enough to finish this dress. The thought that soon she might be out of this house, away from Mr. Beckett and Mr. Mercer, made her knees go weak. She sat down in her chair for a moment, letting the idea of escape take shape in her mind, as though it were a garment. Escape! For so long she'd thought about it, dreamed of it…and now, it seemed, it might actually *happen*.

Ayisha began searching for matching thread amid her many samples. She smiled faintly. When she left, she would be sure to take all of her lovely, sharp, brass and iron needles. They stayed sharper much longer than bronze or bone needles, and they were slimmer, less clumsy. She'd

also take her crochet hook, her knitting needles, and the small hand-loom she'd put together, like the one she often used back home.

The princess smiled as she ran her fingers gently over her many skeins of fine thread. For the embroidery on Mr. Beckett's waistcoats, Mistress Goodwright had purchased silk thread in a rainbow of colors. She'd even provided a lot of the very expensive gold and silver thread, and there was still a considerable amount left. Ayisha nodded to herself. When she left, she'd take all her supplies of thread, too. All the ladies of the royal court would marvel at the silk thread. They had beautiful, fine-spun linen on Kerma, but no cotton or silk.

She wondered whether Mistress Goodwright would actually knock on her door with some errand for her to undertake this very afternoon. The goodwife had the right to walk in without knocking, of course, but she usually didn't—which was another reason why Ayisha liked her.

It was hard to believe that Mr. Beckett had agreed to let her leave his premises. She'd been shut up here so long, the idea of walking down the hill to the harbor made her flush with excitement. And then at some point, this man, this Captain Sparrow, would arrange to meet her. He would offer her a way to escape, in return for giving him the location of her homeland.

She must not seem too eager. He must not suspect that she knew of his plans for her. She would be reserved, and cautious, and keep up her charade. She would not reveal that she spoke English.

He would bargain with her—escape from Calabar in return for the location of her homeland. It would seem a good bargain. He would tell her she would be free, never knowing that she already knew Mr. Beckett's plans for Kerma. "Black gold" he had called her people. Things to be *sold*, like cattle, or horses. Her jaw tightened, and for a moment, her fingers dug hard into the fabric of her apron,

twisting it, as though it were the Englishman's scrawny neck.

But she couldn't allow herself to be distracted. She had to stay focused.

Very well. She concentrated on her plan again. She, Ayisha, once known as Amenirdis, Princess of Zerzura, would willingly promise Captain Sparrow everything he demanded—just as long as he also agreed to *her* terms. First of all, she would not leave Calabar without Tarek. Closing her eyes, she whispered a quick prayer to Apedemak that her bodyguard had not been sold during the months she had been away from the Dalton plantation. If he had, there was no way she would ever find him.

But surely Tarek would still be there. She would take him with her. And so this white man, Captain Sparrow, would sail away from Calabar with not one but *two* runaway slaves.

But that would not be the end of her bargaining, no. She had set out to find her brother, and thanks to Cutler Beckett showing her the pectoral he'd worn, now she knew the chances were overwhelming that if he still lived—she murmured yet another quick prayer to Apedemak—he'd been taken to the New World. Ayisha took a deep breath. Her study of the globe in the Dalton children's schoolroom had shown her what lay across the sea westward from Africa—or as much of it as was known. Shabako could be anywhere.

She raised her chin. That did not matter. She'd heard the greed in the white men's voices as they discussed the rapine of her homeland. The lure of gold turned white men's minds to feathers; it made them willing to do anything to get it. She would have a ship, and a captain to sail the vessel. Together, they would search for Shabako. And surely Apedemak would help her find her brother!

Once Shabako was safely aboard Captain Sparrow's vessel, she would direct the Englishman to sail back to Africa, to the sea between the Cape Verde and the Canary

Islands. Ayisha knew that was what they were called, because the guide they'd hired to take them across Africa to the ancient site of Kerma had pointed them out on a map.

The closer she drew to Zerzura, and the Heart, the more her power would increase. The Heart would lend strength to her spells, increasing their power tenfold, or even more. If she could come within a day or two's sail of home, her power would be sufficient to lay a sleeping spell on the crew, every one of them. They would fall into a deep sleep, and awaken to find Ayisha, Tarek, Shabako, and one of their boats long gone.

And from that day forward, *Ayisha* would truly be gone. Vanished, never to reappear. Gone forever.

Ayisha would disappear from the world, and it would be Princess Amenirdis who would bring her brother home to the Shining City in triumph. Hand in hand, they would mount the steps of the royal palace in the Shining City. Together, they would kneel before their lady mother, Queen Tiyy.

Envisioning this, Ayisha smiled with genuine happiness for the first time in months.

Suddenly realizing she was sitting idle, she knew that would not do. Rising, Ayisha hastened to get ready for her outing, ordering her dress and apron, making sure her white head-wrap was secure, and, finally, washing her hands and face in the ewer of water that stood in the corner, near her rolled-up sleeping pallet. She tied her gray shawl securely around her waist.

Ayisha returned to her work, listening all the while for the tap on the door.

* * *

Ian Mercer had just walked into Cutler Beckett's private office, closing the door behind him, when the two men heard the thumping of feet coming up the stairs, then the rustle of skirts as a woman bustled down the corridor. Moments later the faint sound of Mistress Goodwright tapping on the sewing room door reached them.

Beckett and Mercer did not move or speak, only listened as Mistress Goodwright spoke for a moment, her voice rising and falling, but her words indistinguishable. Moments later, the housekeeper rustled back down the corridor, her shoes making soft thumps on the corridor's carpet runner. They knew Ayisha must be accompanying her, because Mistress Goodwright was prattling away to a listener. The sewing woman made no sound at all.

Only when the two women had gone downstairs did Mercer break the silence. "Are you certain you don't want me to follow her, Mr. Beckett?"

Cutler Beckett shook his head. "I'm sure, Mercer. I'm going to give Captain Sparrow the room he asked for. If for any reason Ayisha were to suspect that he's working for me in this venture, he wouldn't do any better with the creature than we have."

"She's a half-wit," Mercer grumbled. He made a dismissive gesture. "If she's even *from* Zerzura. I have my doubts. I'm telling you, Mr. Beckett, that creature couldn't find her way back there if she could walk on water and had a ball of string."

Cutler Beckett raised his eyebrows at his operative. "Why Mr. Mercer, that's actually quite a humorous image." He gestured at the chair Jack Sparrow had used that morning. "Have a seat."

Mercer sat, still glowering. Beckett realized his operative actually felt threatened by the notion that Jack Sparrow, whom Ian Mercer regarded as a smelly, prattling, lower-class molly who gave himself airs, might succeed where he, Mercer, had failed. *Why, I believe he's jealous*, Beckett thought, amused.

But his tone was all business when he asked, "Did you find someone to plant aboard Sparrow's ship?"

Mercer nodded. "Yes, Mr. Beckett. One of the men I've used before, Samuel Newton by name, has agreed to sign on for the voyage. He's never sailed before, except as a

passenger, but he was apprenticed to a carpenter, so he's got a very useful skill."

"And he can read and write?"

"Yes, sir," Mercer said. "I checked his hand myself. He'll send us reports whenever Sparrow makes port."

"Very good, Mr. Mercer. I know I can always depend on you," Cutler Beckett said, nodding pleasantly at his operative.

Mercer nodded back. "Thank you, Mr. Beckett. I suppose now it's a waiting game, to see what happens."

Cutler Beckett sighed. "Yes, a waiting game," he said. "That's exactly what it is. Let us hope that Captain Sparrow will play the game by the rules…that is, *our* rules. If he doesn't, he may find himself losing a great deal more than his rank and his livelihood."

Mercer smiled. It was a rusty, not often used, expression.

Beckett smiled back. "By the way, Mercer, would you care for a glass of some excellent port I've acquired?"

Mercer hesitated. Beckett knew he seldom indulged. That was one of the things that made him such a treasure as an operative. Finally, he nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Beckett. One glass would be fine."

Jack Sparrow stood with Chamba beneath a striped awning, close to a narrow alley that ran between the shoemaker's shop and the chandler's shop in the business district of Calabar. There were only a handful of permanent buildings in the marketplace—most of that crowded, noisy enclave consisted of carts with awnings, or makeshift stalls. Vendors cried their wares, and the air was redolent with the smells of fish, fresh baked bread, grilling yams, and the stench of unwashed humanity and raw sewage, an odor so ever-present the men didn't consciously notice it. "She should be coming along this way any time, Cap'n," Chamba said. "She

be pretty easy to spot. Mr. Beckett, he told you the truth ’bout her.”

“What’s she wearing?” Jack asked.

“She be wearin’ a blue calico dress, with a white apron and head wrap, Cap’n. And of course that gray shawl you told me to watch for. It be tied round her waist.”

Jack squinted against the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun. “I see a blue dress…” he muttered. “Must be Ayisha.” Quickly he stepped back into the alley, then peered out so he could see without being seen.

As the woman drew close enough to make out her features, Jack blinked in surprise. His quarry was not just ugly, she was *extraordinarily* ugly. Cross-eyed, buck-toothed, with blotchy skin, warts, heavy eyebrows…she was barefoot, and even her feet were ugly. “God’s toenails,” Jack breathed. “She is *really* ugly.”

“Told ya.”

“Nevertheless, it’s important that I make her acquaintance,” Jack said. Taking out the flask he carried beneath his coat, he poured a scant handful of its contents into his palm, then began flicking droplots over Chamba’s shirt. “Now here’s what I want you to do, Chamba…”

A few minutes later, her basket filled with yams and two coconuts, Ayisha had finished her shopping. Turning around, she started back through the marketplace, heading for the street that eventually led up the hill to Beckett’s house. She’d barely reached the first cross-street before a young man wearing a sailor’s cap, loose shirt, and rough britches came rushing around the corner, not looking where he was going. He barged into Ayisha’s basket hard enough to knock it out of her hands. Yams scattered everywhere, and one of the coconuts bounced along the cobblestones to roll right under the hooves of a horse pulling an overloaded dray.

“Watch where you going, boy!” Ayisha exclaimed, in pidgin.

Babbling apologies, the young crewman began scrabbling around, snatching up fallen yams and replacing them in the basket. Ayisha stood there, staring at the split coconut. To add insult to injury, it had landed square in the middle of a fresh pile of horse manure.

“Chamba? Chamba!” Right on cue, Jack came striding around the corner. “Blast that lad, didn’t I tell him not to—” Breaking off, he stared at his crewman, then at Ayisha. “Chamba, what happened here?” he demanded.

The young sailor explained that he’d knocked the basket down, causing one of the coconuts to be ruined. Shamefacedly, Chamba pointed to the coconut, sitting there like some kind of large, cracked, hairy egg in the middle of a dung nest.

Jack gave his crewman a severe dressing-down for his carelessness, culminating in a demand that Chamba walk back to the market before it closed and buy the woman he’d wronged a replacement coconut. With a hangdog look, Chamba confessed to his captain that he’d spent all his money in the tavern.

Hearing this, Jack turned to Ayisha, who had been watching this byplay stolidly, and doffed his tricorne. “Excuse me, miss, do you speak English?”

Ayisha did not reply, and her expression didn’t change. Jack glanced at his crewman. “Chamba, please translate.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“Miss, I’m Captain Jack Sparrow, and I wish to apologize for my clumsy crewman. He should know better than to spend the afternoon drinking and spending all his money on rum. If you will please wait here, I shall give him some coins and send him back to the market, so I might make good on the damage he caused you and your coconut.”

Chamba dutifully addressed Ayisha in pidgin. Jack, watching the lad, thought that it was regrettable the youth couldn’t aspire to a career on the stage. His acting ability

was remarkable. He had exactly the right mix of chagrin, embarrassment, and truculence in his voice and demeanor.

Ayisha nodded, once, in Jack's direction, so he handed the youth a couple of coins, whereupon Chamba took to his heels and plunged back into the cheerful chaos that was the marketplace.

Jack and Ayisha waited for his return in silence.

Chamba returned, brandishing a coconut—a bigger, hairier one than the one he'd destroyed. He handed it to Jack, and Jack, with a half bow, held it out to Beckett's slave woman. Hesitantly, she reached over and took it, putting it into her basket.

Jack tried another smile. "Miss, perhaps you wouldn't mind if we escorted you home? My crewman would be happy to carry that heavy basket for you. It's really the least we can do, under the circumstances."

Chamba translated.

After a long moment, the ugly woman glanced quickly at Jack—the first time she'd looked at him directly, or as directly as she could, given the casts in her eyes—and then said something briefly. "She say 'very well' Cap'n," Chamba reported, as he relieved Ayisha of her basket.

With the slave woman in the middle, they walked along the street that led to the hill where Cutler Beckett's town house waited at the top. Jack ambled along in silence, but Chamba chattered away. Even though he didn't speak pidgin, Jack knew the gist of what his crewman was saying, because he and Chamba had rehearsed all of this thoroughly, before Chamba had gone looking for Beckett's sewing woman.

First, he asked the woman her name, and finally, after a long pause, she replied.

"Ayisha!" Chamba repeated. "That be a pretty name, miss. I be Chamba. I sails aboard the *Wicked Wench*, me. The *Wench*, she a fine ship tied up down at the docks. I be

guessing that you be a slave, ma'am? Who be your master?"

Ayisha did not answer for a long moment, then she replied shortly, her voice still soft, but her intonation brusque. Jack regarded her out of the corner of his eye, noticing that she habitually walked with her eyes down, as if afraid to look questioners in the eye. Jack remembered when Chamba had done much the same thing. He glanced at Chamba over her bent head inquiringly, and the lad replied, "She say, 'No man my master. My *owner* be Mr. Beckett.'"

Chamba began chattering again. Jack knew he was telling Ayisha that he, too, had once been a slave, but that he'd managed to escape, with Captain Sparrow's help. Chamba would then add that all the slaves hereabouts knew his history, but they kept it from the whites, because they didn't want the one decent white man, Captain Sparrow, to suffer because he'd helped a slave.

When Chamba fell silent, Ayisha did not respond. Jack glanced down at her, thinking this was going to be more difficult than he'd envisioned. This woman certainly wasn't half-witted; her remark differentiating "masters" from "owners" proved that. But it was possible that she was so set against those who had enslaved her that she wouldn't believe anything anyone told her, even if they were offering her what had to be her most cherished desire.

Just as Jack reached this point in his musings, Ayisha spoke to Chamba, the longest speech he'd heard her make. As before, she spoke softly, but her tone was cynical, dismissive. "What did she say?" he asked Chamba.

"She say that you only help me escape because you set out to spite Portmaster Blount because he tried to give you bad supplies. She tell me no white man would help a slave unless there be something in it for him."

Jack was stung. "She's wrong. I helped you because I wanted to help you. I admit that I enjoyed foxing Blount, but

that’s not why I pulled you through that window.”

“I be knowing that, Cap’n, you think I don’t? Only reason I jump in that river with that log was to get to *you*, because I be knowing in me heart you wouldn’t be taking me to spite Blount, then selling me to fatten your purse.”

Surprised, Jack glanced quickly at his crewman. “The idea of selling you never crossed my mind, Chamba,” he said, truthfully, then added, “though I admit that I did think about just closing the window and walking away.” After a moment, Jack flashed a grin at his crewman. “It’s a bloody good thing I didn’t know just how much trouble you’d cause me.”

“I did cause you a fair bit of trouble, eh?” Chamba returned the grin.

“Well, I’d appreciate it if you’d attempt to make the truth clear to Miss Ayisha,” Jack said. He looked up, then halted, because he could see the roof of Beckett’s town house. “I’m going to stop here, Chamba,” he said. “You carry the basket a bit farther. I don’t want to risk being seen with Ayisha. Can you please explain that to her, with my apologies for not escorting her all the way up?”

Chamba responded with a rapid spate of pidgin. Ayisha glanced over in Jack’s direction, then nodded silent acknowledgment.

Jack smiled at her, and then touched the brim of his tricorne. “Farewell, Miss Ayisha. Perhaps we’ll meet again,” he said. Turning, he headed back down the hill. He walked slowly, and before he’d reached the docks, Chamba caught up with him.

They fell into step, heading for the *Wicked Wench*’s berth. “How did it go?” Jack asked.

“I be explaining to—”

Jack waggled a finger at the young man. “It’s a good time to practice your ‘gentleman’s English,’ don’t you think, lad?”

Chamba nodded. “Very well, Captain,” he said, his voice changing, growing a bit deeper, his rapid speech slowing, becoming deliberate. He enunciated carefully. “I explained to Miss Ayisha that you been acting—” he broke off, then amended, “that you acted as you did because you wanted to help me, not because you wanted to spite Portmaster Blount.”

“Good,” Jack said. “Nicely phrased. Pray continue.”

“I believe by the time I left, Miss Ayisha believed me. I asked her whether she had ever thought of escaping, and she said, ‘What slave doesn’t?’”

“Very good,” Jack said, approvingly. “Anything else?”

“After I mentioned escaping, just before she took her basket and went around the back door to the kitchen area, she said, ‘Will I see you again? Perhaps we could talk about this more.’”

“Aha!” Jack said, “Clearly, we have implanted the seed of an idea. Now we need to let it grow and bear fruit.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Very good diction, Chamba.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Chamba hesitated, then said, “Do you really intend to help Ayisha escape?”

“If she’ll agree to it, yes, I do.”

Chamba looked at Jack intently for a long moment, and when he spoke again, he’d dropped back into his customary speech pattern. “Why only her, Cap’n? Why she be the onliest one? Ever think we could take more? Free a passel of slaves, ’stead of just one?”

Jack sighed. “I wish I could, but I can’t. Until the law is changed, and the filthy practice is declared illegal, rescuing slaves usually means they just end up getting recaptured and owned by someone else.” They’d reached the dock where the *Wicked Wench* was moored. Jack stopped at the end of it, so they could conclude their conversation in private.

Chamba nodded sadly. “I understand. But that bring me back to the first question, Cap’n. Why *Ayisha*?”

Jack hesitated for a long moment. Finally he said, “I want to help her escape so I can take her home, Chamba.”

Chamba took a deep breath, eyeing his captain. It was plain that he realized that Jack was holding something major back. “Ain’t no chance you mean her harm, right, Cap’n?”

“I mean her no harm,” Jack said, with perfect truth, though an image flashed into his mind of Cutler Beckett, and the greed that had flared in the EITC director’s normally cool eyes when he’d talked about a hundred years of selling “black gold.”

The young crewman waited, obviously hoping for a more complete explanation, but Jack volunteered nothing more. “Cap’n, you want I should go by there tomorrow? Talk to her again?”

“Give her one day to think it over,” Jack said. “You can go back on Wednesday. Just do what you were doing today… tell her that escape is possible, that you’re living proof, and that she can be the next escapee.”

“And what then, Cap’n?”

“Unless I miss my guess, she’ll soon ask you how she can gain her freedom. And that’s when you’ll bring me back with you, so I may talk to her. I’ll explain my terms, and we’ll talk about how she can get away.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

For the next few days, Jack, conscious of possibly having to slip away without notice, drove his crew to off-load, then reload, the *Wicked Wench* as quickly as possible. After the new cargo, bound for Antigua, was secured in the hold, it was time to replenish their stores. Jack was pleased that Cutler Beckett remembered his promise, and that two extra casks of powder plus extra ammunition were delivered.

He was also pleased that Robby Greene managed to hire another able seaman, plus another ordinary seaman. The ordinary seaman was a well-muscled man named

Samuel Newton. A brief interview revealed that although he had little shipboard experience, he had been working as a carpenter's apprentice. Jack promptly assigned him to assist the ship's carpenter.

Every day Chamba disappeared into the marketplace for a couple of hours.

The *Wicked Wench* had been in port for a week and a day when Chamba sought out his captain to tell him that Ayisha wanted to meet with him. "In the marketplace?" Jack said.

"No, Cap'n. She told me she gonna sneak out tonight, meet us where the road end and docks begin, beside the EITC warehouse. She will come as soon as Mr. Beckett's household asleep."

"She's ready to go tonight?" Jack was surprised and pleased.

"No, Cap'n. She said she want to talk to you about somethin' first. She have questions. And you gonna have to promise her somethin', before she come aboard and we set sail."

Jack nodded. "She's going to have to promise me something, too," he said. "Very well, we'll meet tonight. She thinks she can get out of the house?"

"She say she think so. She say she try tonight, see how it go."

"A dress rehearsal," Jack said. Chamba looked at him inquiringly, and he explained the term.

That night, Chamba and Jack left the *Wench* after five bells of the evening watch, and walked over to the EITC warehouse. They sat down on a couple of bales of coir and waited. Jack had brought his flask containing his good rum, and sipped a bit while they talked quietly, just passing the time. The sliver of a moon had already set, so the stars provided the only illumination. Out on the river, they could see the ship lanterns, and their glowing reflections glimmering as crooked yellow streaks on the black river.

Jack was just about to suggest that they walk up the road a bit, when Chamba suddenly turned his head, listening. Moments later, he saw movement. Wearing a dark dress, her head covered by a shawl, the woman coalesced out of the dark. Soundless on bare feet, she drifted toward them like a wraith.

They stood up, watching her approach. When Ayisha reached them, Jack gestured her to a seat, and asked, “Did you have any trouble getting away?”

Chamba translated. She shook her head no.

“Good.” Jack sat down beside her, and regarded her for a long moment. “Miss Ayisha, it’s time for us to speak frankly and straightforwardly. Enough tacking back and forth, savvy? I’m going to run straight before the wind, and I want you to do the same.” He waited while Chamba translated, knowing the lad was smart enough to put the nautical phrases into terms a landlubber would understand. Ayisha nodded agreement, sitting poised, her hands folded in her lap.

“You obviously want to escape slavery, Miss Ayisha. I can help you escape. If I could do it, I’d free every slave here in Calabar,” Jack said, then added, in a burst of honesty, “I’d bloody free them all, everywhere.” Hearing the anger in his own voice surprised him, and he turned his head to stare out at the black river, seeing the yellow trails marking the anchorages of the slave vessels. He heard Chamba translating, very quietly. After a moment he took a deep breath. *Tend to business, Jacky boy*, the voice in his head reminded him. *Or are you going soft? Slaves aren’t your business. Finding treasure is.*

Jack turned back to his two listeners. “So, Miss Ayisha, I can take you with me when I sail away from here, if we come to an agreement. I’ll be leaving port soon.”

He waited while Chamba translated. Ayisha spoke a few words. Chamba turned back to Jack. “She say, what

agreement? Why would you do this for her? You must want somethin'—so what that somethin' be?"

"She's right," Jack said. "I want to find the lost island of Kerma. There's treasure there. I read about it in a book when I was younger than you are now, Chamba. At first I thought the whole tale of a lost island where there's a lot of gold and treasure must be just a legend. But some time ago…" he hesitated. "I had an…encounter…with someone who claimed to be from Zerzura."

Jack heard Ayisha gasp in the darkness, even before Chamba finished translating. Her voice was low and hoarse with emotion as she clutched Chamba's arm, speaking urgently to the youth. Chamba sounded surprised when he translated. "Cap'n, she be all upset. Ask me if you seen a young man, 'bout my age, actually looks a bit like me? And that young man, he claimed to be from Zerzura?"

"No," Jack said. "Tell her I'm sorry, it was nothing like that."

As Chamba began to speak, Ayisha slumped forward, burying her face in her hands. Even in the darkness, Jack could see her shoulders moving. Chamba leaned over, spoke softly to her, his voice filled with concern. "Is she crying?" Jack asked, apprehensively. Weeping women were unnerving. Fumbling inside his waistcoat, he took out his little flask of rum and shook it. There were a few swallows remaining. "Here, give her a nip of this, Chamba. Rum helps everything."

Chamba spoke softly to the woman, pressing the flask into her hand. She sat up shakily, then raised the flask, threw her head back and swigged a mouthful. She gulped, then gagged. For a moment Jack worried she might cough up his expensive rum, but she managed to swallow it. Reaching over, Jack relieved her of the flask, lest she drop it. "There you go, love," he said, heartily. "That should fix you right up. Works wonders for me."

To Chamba, he said, “When she can talk again, ask her what she was talking about.”

After Ayisha stopped coughing, Chamba asked her. The slave woman hesitated for a long moment, then finally replied, her voice calm and steady.

“She say she thought you might have seen somebody she know, somebody that was traveling with her,” Chamba translated. “In the caravan she was part of, when that Duke Wren-John, he come along and capture all of them.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. *Whomever she was asking about before she broke down, that person was very important to her. And yet now, she’s completely composed. Something’s not adding up here.* For a moment he was tempted to pursue the subject, but really, what did it matter? She’d just given him the opening to bring up the caravan, and he needed to pursue that.

He nodded. “I see. Please tell her I heard Mr. Beckett talking about this Duke fellow, and claiming that Duke had captured a caravan of people who had come from Zerzura. Mr. Beckett told me that he believes Ayisha is one of them, and he showed me these.”

As Chamba obediently translated, Jack reached into the pocket fastened beneath the waistband of his britches, and took out the gold earrings. He held them up. In the starlight, the gold gleamed with a faint, silvery glow. “When Mr. Beckett showed me some pieces of jewelry, including these earrings, I knew he wasn’t imagining that they’d come from Zerzura. They’re exactly like the designs I saw in that book, so long ago. Have you seen them before, Miss Ayisha? Were you part of that caravan? Was there someone in the caravan who wore them? Someone royal? Were you her servant?”

Jack waited while Chamba translated. Ayisha made a low-voiced reply. Her hands, he noticed, no longer lay quietly in her lap. Instead they were twisted in the fabric of her dress.

Chamba nodded. “She say yes, Cap’n. She say those earrings belonged to her royal mistress, the princess of Zerzura.”

Jack’s breath caught in his throat. “What happened to the princess?” he asked.

Ayisha’s reply to Chamba’s translated question was voiced in such bleak tones that Jack knew the answer wouldn’t be good. Chamba turned back to him, and said quietly, “She say one morning the princess not able to stand up, so Duke shoot her here.” He touched his forehead, between his eyes.

“Damn,” Jack said, unable to think of anything else to say. For a moment he was tempted to burden this serving woman with what he knew about the royal house of Zerzura, and the labyrinth leading to the treasure, but what was the point, now?

After a moment, he sighed and said, “I’m sorry, Miss Ayisha. The man’s an animal. But you’re still alive. I’m willing to take you home to Kerma, so you can tell the people there what happened. You know where the island is, don’t you?”

Chamba translated. The woman’s head moved in the starlight as she nodded, then she spoke. Chamba said, “She say, south of the Canaries, north of the Cape Verdes.”

Jack sighed. “That’s a lot of square miles of ocean, Miss. Could you point to it if I showed you a map?”

After her reply, Chamba translated: “She say no, Cap’n. She say Kerma closer to the Cape Verdes than to the Canaries. But she don’t know how to read English, and she sure don’t know how to read charts.”

“Not good,” Jack said, looking down at the earrings glimmering faintly in his palm. “Ask her if she wants me to take her home, and if so, how does she propose I do that, if she can’t give me the bearings?”

Ayisha didn’t speak for at least a minute, but finally, she said something, her tone soft and hesitant. Chamba

reported, “She say she what my tribe would call a wise woman. Maybe you call it priestess? Anyway, she say if you get her close to her home, she will…*feel* …where her homeland be. Then she point you the rest of the way.”

Ayisha spoke again. Chamba sounded awed by her response. “She say her home hidden. People who sail past will not see it unless they have someone like her aboard to break the…” He cast about for the word. “The…seeming,” he said. “Looking like one thing, when it something else.”

“Illusion?” Jack suggested.

Chamba nodded. “Right word, Cap’n, thank you. Yes. She mean illusion.”

“I see,” Jack said. “Very well. I guess that’s going to be the way of it, then. I’ll sail to that area, between the Cape Verde Islands and the Canary Islands, and together we’ll find her home.” He thought about Tia Dalma’s compass, wondering if it would work for anyone but him. He couldn’t visualize Kerma, but this woman could. If Ayisha couldn’t find the island on her own, he’d let her try the compass. *And once I know where it is, I’ll be able to plot the bearings onto the chart*, he thought. *In the event I decide to share them with Cutler Beckett…*

Jack wasn’t any too sure that he would, in fact, give Beckett the bearings to Kerma. If there was gold and treasure on the island, why should he share, especially with someone who intended to make a clean sweep of the place and take them all for slaves? *Talk about killing the goose that lays the golden eggs*, he thought, contemptuously.

“So we have an agreement, Miss Ayisha,” he said aloud. “Chamba, tell her if that if she takes me to Zerzura, I’ll give her the earrings that belonged to the princess, so she’ll have something to remember her by.”

A moment later, Chamba translated her reply. “She say she be glad to have them, Cap’n. She say she know that you be wanting a reward in return for taking her home.” Ayisha spoke again. Chamba’s voice cracked with excitement as he

translated. “She say she sure the queen of Zerzura will give you and your men much gold, for your reward.”

Jack felt a wave of excitement himself. “That would be *lovely*, darling,” he chirped, nodding at Ayisha, and smiling. *Just what I was hoping to hear!*

Ayisha smiled back at him. It was the first time he’d seen her features express anything but wary neutrality. Her smile held more than a touch of smugness about it, but Jack was too focused on visions of gold to take much notice of it.

“So when shall we go?” Jack said, wrenching his mind away from aureate fantasies. He saw that she had brought nothing with her. “How about tonight, Miss Ayisha?” Chamba translated.

Ayisha responded briefly, then launched into a longer speech, using her hands to gesture toward the south, then holding up five fingers. Jack realized she was speaking of something very important. Concerned, he leaned forward, waiting for the translation. Chamba looked at him. “You not gonna like this, Cap’n,” he warned.

“Go on. When does she want to go?”

“She say she fine to leave tomorrow night. She say there be some things she want to bring with her, but she don’t have them now, they back in her room. But she *also* say that before she leave Calabar, there be someone she have to bring along with her. Another slave. She say she will not leave without him.”

“Him?” Jack repeated, startled. “Who is he? What is he to her?” *But I thought she lost the only person she cared about! What’s going on?* Jack was skeptical. Could it be possible that Ayisha had a husband or a lover among the other members of the caravan? He reminded himself that not all men were obsessed with women’s faces and bodies… only most of them, in his experience.

“She say he her *friend*.” Chamba emphasized the word. “She say this slave belong to Mr. Dalton. Dalton farm a big place outside Calabar, on the south road.”

“How *far* south?” Jack demanded.

“Maybe five mile, she say.”

“Oh, great,” Jack said. “And I suppose she expects me to help her go steal this slave.”

“I think so, Cap’n.”

“Damn and blast,” Jack said, with feeling. “And here I thought this would be easy. Does she know where this slave’s sleeping quarters are, at this farm?” Chamba translated.

Ayisha nodded, yes.

“All right,” Jack said. “I’ll do it. But she’d better be telling the truth about knowing where this fellow will be sleeping.” He gave Ayisha a glance that held more than a little irritation. She gave him a faint, enigmatic smile, serene as a Madonna.

Jack did some rapid calculations, realizing that in order to make sure they reached the Dalton farm in the middle of the night, and had time to return well before dawn, they’d have to move fast. *I’ll need a horse*, he thought. *Or a horse and a wagon.*

It would take a human at least ninety minutes to walk five miles. A horse could travel five miles in less than an hour, and that was at a moderate pace. Jack sighed. *I’ll have to hire one at the local livery.*

“Tell her I’ll meet her tomorrow night as soon as she can sneak out, on the south road, just out of sight of town,” he said.

Chamba translated. Ayisha nodded yes.

Jack had only ridden a few times in his life, and not for any distance. He decided that hiring a carriage or a small wagon would be the best idea. He felt sure he could drive easier than he could ride, and there would be a place for Ayisha to sit. For a moment he considered trying to take a boat. The main river ran east to west, not north to south. But there were smaller tributaries that flowed into the Calabar, and they wound all around in the area. There was a

good chance that one of those tributaries flowed past this farm. But if he asked questions about the Dalton farm, people would likely remember that later, when this slave turned up missing. Best to stick to the road. *My kingdom for a horse*, Jack thought, grumpily. After all, human beings had been riding for millennia. How hard could it be?

The next day, Jack dutifully presented himself at the livery to hire a horse and wagon, only to discover that all of the wagons were presently on hire, and none was expected back before the following day. The manager of the livery offered him a fat pony and a cart, but Jack knew that wouldn't hold three adults. He shook his head. "No, that won't do," he said. "I'll need a horse…or maybe two horses," he amended.

"You're in luck, sir," the manager said. "Two horses happen to be what I have available." He waved Jack into the stable, and pointed to the first two stalls. "The bay gelding and the chestnut gelding," he said.

Great, thought Jack. *Horse eunuchs.*

He walked into the third, empty stall to peer at the two animals. The tall bay horse raised its head and looked at him. "Good fellow," said Jack, reaching through the bars to pat it. Quick as summer lightning, the animal's ears swept back and it swung its nose toward his hand, lips drawing back from its large, squared-off teeth. Jack hastily yanked his hand back. He knew hostility when he saw it.

"Caesar will nip a little, have to be careful with him," said the manager, heartily. "But he's a fine, strong beast, and can go all day." Jack looked at the horse's bright eyes, and saw that its coat gleamed. Its muscles appeared smooth and powerful.

He took a look at the other candidate. The chestnut horse stood, head hanging, lower lip drooping, its coat rough, not sleek. Jack was suspicious of the way this one

rested all its weight on only three of its legs. Even a non-horseman could tell the beast was resting no weight on its portside forefoot. “What’s wrong with that leg?” he asked, pointing down. Even in the dimness of the stall, he could see that the leg below the knee appeared swollen.

“Oh, he’s just a little stiff on that leg,” the manager said dismissively. “He works right out of that once he’s gone a mile or so.”

Jack glanced at the manager skeptically. “I see,” he said, and he *did* see. This was the equivalent of trying to pass a rowboat half full of water off on a lubber, claiming “it just needs a little bailing every so often.”

“I’ll take the bay horse. Caesar,” he said, pointing. “I’ll need him this evening. Going to ride over and see a…lady… that I know.” He smiled, man to man. “If all goes well, I might not be back until dawn.”

“Ah, I see, sir! Well, that would be all right. Just make sure you bring the animal back with his skin cool, his coat dry, not all sweaty, you know. Give him a drink of water at the trough, loosen the saddle girth, then tie him to the hitching rail over there,” the manager pointed.

“Very well,” Jack said. “What time can I pick him up?”

“I’ll leave him saddled up, all ready to go, tied to the hitching rail,” the manager said. “Remember to just tighten up the girth before you mount, sir, then away you go.” He held out his hand, and named an amount.

Jack paid. “I’ll need some of those leather cargo containers I’ve seen before. The ones that fasten to the back of the saddle.”

“Saddlebags?”

“Precisely what I had in mind,” Jack said. “Right. Oh, and…how about you show me where the girth is, mate?”

He was back that night, about five bells of the evening watch. His mount awaited him, tied to the hitching rail. Caesar was saddled, and the requested saddlebags were in place. The horse himself appeared to be asleep; his eyes

were closed, and his aft starboard leg was cocked up. He appeared very relaxed.

Jack untied the gelding and looked at the stirrup. It seemed an ungodly way up. He raised his foot, and grabbed the saddle. It rocked in his hands. *Ah, yes. Tighten girth*, he remembered.

It was more difficult at night, but luckily the crescent moon was still up, though sinking fast. Fumbling, he found the proper straps and buckles, and gave a strong tug. Caesar snaked his head around, teeth bared and aiming for Jack's forearm. Before the horse could grab him, Jack managed to pull his left arm out of range. Doubling up his fist, he gave the creature a clout on its nose. He was gratified to see that the blow appeared to convince Caesar that this particular human's arm wasn't fodder.

The second time he pulled on the girth, the horse put its ears back, but that was all. Jack got the girth tightened.

"Easy," he told himself, feeling cheered. "Millennia, right."

He was about to lift his foot up to the stirrup again, when he realized the large, sawed-off tree trunk next to the hitching post must serve as a mounting block. Stepping up, he located the stirrup with his left foot, swung his right leg over, and settled himself on the horse's back.

Jack remembered how to steer, one rein in each hand, so he pulled Caesar's head to starboard and headed out of the yard, onto the street. He kept the beast to a walk, experimenting with how to sit so he didn't mash tender parts of his anatomy. As he reached the end of the cobblestoned part of the street, he chirruped to the gelding, and Caesar obligingly increased his speed, breaking into a trot. Jack bounced, his teeth clacking together until he thought he'd bite his tongue off. After a moment, however, he managed to balance a bit more, and stood in his stirrups so he wasn't slamming his rear—or anything else—against the saddle. That was better.

The horse trotted along, past the last houses of Calabar, heading down the southern road. On either side, trees and brush reared up. Jack tugged on both reins, and Caesar slowed back down to a walk. He glanced behind him, but couldn't see the town. *If she's already here, this should be the place.*

A voice spoke softly, in a language Jack didn't recognize. Caesar pricked up his ears. A few yards away, brush moved, then the Zerzuran woman stepped out onto the road. It was dark, but Jack's night vision was good, and he could see her. She seemed to be dressed as she had been the previous night, but she was carrying a cloth bag about the size of a pillowcase.

"Right on time," Jack said, approvingly. "I'm afraid I could only get one of these beasts, the other one seemed to be needing a peg leg. So we'll have to both ride Caesar, here." He didn't know why he was talking to the woman, when she didn't speak or understand English, but he supposed it couldn't do any harm. He smiled at her and patted Caesar's rump. "Can you get up here?"

She stepped over to him and busied herself for a moment, opening her bag and dividing the contents between the two saddlebags, then stuffing the empty bag in on top. Peering around by starlight, Jack made out a fallen log lying by the side of the road. He pointed to it. "Why don't you stand there?"

With some difficulty, he managed to maneuver Caesar over to the log. Ayisha stepped up on it. Jack extended his hand, and, after a moment's hesitation, she grabbed it. She jumped. Jack pulled strongly. A moment later, she was up behind him, holding on to the back of the saddle. "There you go, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Jack said. "Now we'll head for that farm."

He pulled on the portside rein, turning Caesar's nose so he faced south, and chirruped to the gelding. "Giddyup!"

Caesar snorted, but didn’t move. He seemed to be pushing his nose downward, taking up all the slack in the loose reins. “Come on!” Jack urged, and kicked the gelding, just as Ayisha’s hands moved. At first Jack thought she was trying to hold on to his waist, but then he realized she was groping, trying to grab the reins out of his hands.

Several things happened at the same moment. Caesar’s head disappeared altogether, the horse moved violently, and something hard seemed to surge up beneath the saddle. Jack had only a moment, as Ayisha grabbed frantically, trying to take the reins, to realize that Caesar was plunging like a ship in a typhoon, and then both he and the slave woman were flying into the air.

Jack landed in the middle of the road, his wind knocked out. Flaming stars cartwheeled past his vision. He lay there, gasping like a landed fish, for what seemed an eternity, before he could draw breath again. Finally, with a gasp that turned into a groan, he managed to roll over and get to his knees, then stagger to his feet.

Caesar was about forty feet away. From the sound of it, he was calmly snacking on all of the underbrush he could reach by the side of the road. Ayisha was climbing to her feet, clutching her shawl around her. Her head-cloth had come loose, and lay on her shoulder, along with her shawl. As Jack watched, she pulled it free, then looked straight at him. Even in the darkness, he could tell she was giving him a disgusted glare.

“Damn!” Jack mumbled. “Bloody horse.” He began trudging toward Caesar, who raised his head, ears pricked, to regard him. Jack held out his hand. “Nice horsey. C’mere, you scurvy nag.” Caesar didn’t like being called a “scurvy nag.” He snorted, raised his tail, and began trotting away, tail waving like a banner. Cursing under his breath, Jack began running after him.

“Stop that, you fool!”

For one crazed second, Jack thought that Caesar had spoken. Then he whirled around to see Ayisha wave her arms at him. Her voice reached him again. “Don’t you know *anything*? You run, the horse runs! And he can run a lot faster than you!”

Jack’s mouth fell open. “You speak English,” he said, inanely.

“Let me catch him,” she said, not deigning to answer the obvious. “Wait here.”

Leaving Jack in the middle of the road, she walked over to the underbrush. He saw her bend down, heard tearing sounds. She straightened up, and he realized she had a big handful of grass. She started after Caesar, sauntering slowly, rather aimlessly, holding the grass out, crooning in that language Jack had never heard. It must be her native tongue, he realized.

Caesar eyed her, then he whuffled at her. It was a hungry sound. Ayisha continued to amble along. When she stopped, she sniffed the grass, then made enthusiastic noises, as though she were smelling food prepared by Mr. Beckett’s cook. Then she held out the grass, wiggling it enticingly, still crooning. The gelding took a hesitant step toward her. Then another.

Moments later, Caesar was caught.

Ayisha did something with the stirrups, then led the horse back to Jack. “I will ride up front, because *I* can control him,” she said. Her English was accented, but perfectly understandable…not to mention grammatical. “*You* will ride behind.”

Jack rubbed his backside. “I could just run,” he suggested.

“Not as fast as a trotting horse, and not for long,” she said. Gathering up the reins, she raised a bare foot, then a moment later she was in the saddle, her skirts tucked in around her legs. Jack caught a glimpse of bare calves in the starlight, but that was all.

He blinked, and Caesar was standing quietly beside the log. Jack went over to it, climbed up, and then grabbed the back of the saddle and jumped up. The horse's backside felt slick and precarious. He clutched the back of the saddle. "You may hold on to me, Captain Sparrow," Ayisha said. "I will not fall."

Jack barely had time to place his hands on either side of her waist, before Caesar wheeled smartly around, and began trotting down the road…a slow, gentle trot. "Relax, Captain Sparrow," she called back. "When your back is stiff, you bounce. Relax, then you can sit."

He tried to comply, and discovered that, as she had said, relaxing his back made the gait much easier to sit. It became springy, rather than jarring. The miles flowed smoothly past.

When they reached the Dalton farm, Ayisha and Jack slid off the horse, and she handed him the reins. "You stay here, Captain Sparrow. I will go and bring Tarek."

"Can't we just tie him up?" Jack asked.

"No. Horses who must stand and wait become bored, like humans.

When they become bored, they paw, they break their reins, and they call out to other horses. We don't want that, do we?"

"No, we don't," Jack conceded.

"Just hold him and talk to him…*softly*. Pat him. If starts to make any noise, put your hand atop his nostrils, like this —" Jack's hand was seized and pressed onto the horse's nose. "Not too hard. Pressing and rubbing his nostrils will keep him from calling out to his kin."

Jack opened his mouth to ask how long she'd be, but, with a rustle of underbrush, she was gone.

Feeling ridiculous, he patted Caesar, and began talking to the horse…*softly*. After a while, he ran out of "good boys" and began telling him sea stories. He'd reached the tale of the time the *Breton Bay* went through the typhoon, and four

crewmen were swept right off her stern, when he heard a soft rustle of brush.

Moments later, Ayisha emerged from the underbrush. There was someone with her. Jack found himself looking up. The newcomer was more than a full head taller than Jack, and far broader, especially across his shoulders.

“Captain Sparrow,” she whispered. “This is Tarek. He will run, while we ride.”

“If you don’t mind,” Jack said, “I’d just as soon stretch me legs a bit. I’ll run for the first mile or two.” He nodded to Tarek. “Besides, they’re bound to look for you, mate, and they’ll likely use dogs. If you ride for a while, might confuse them, make them lose the scent.”

Ayisha nodded. “That is good thinking, Captain. We shall do as you suggest.”

The threesome headed north, back to Calabar.

By six bells of the middle watch, Caesar was returned to the livery, watered, girth loosened, and securely tied to the hitching rail.

Jack, Ayisha, and Tarek made their way along the dock to the *Wicked Wench*. Robby and Chamba, as expected, were waiting for them, with the longboats already crewed and ready to tow. Moments after the gangplank was pulled up, the mooring lines were cast off, and the *Wicked Wench* glided out into the river, towed by her boats, soundless as a ghost vessel of legend. The tide was going out, and that helped, too.

By the time the ship had left the harbor behind, they’d raised minimum sail. Long before dawn lightened the east, they had reached the Atlantic.

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Chapter Ten
Revelations

The day the ***Wicked Wench*** turned her stern to Calabar Harbor, Jack looked forward to putting a goodly number of nautical miles beneath her keel. Thoughts of Zerzura, and its treasure, reverberated in his mind like siren song, and he was impatient to get there. Unfortunately, the winds were against them, blowing west to east. Coming back to Africa was easy—going away was the challenge. For the next few weeks, they'd have to tack back and forth to make forward progress, rather than the comparatively easy and straightforward progress of running before the wind. Fortunately, Jack and his crew were used to dealing with the vagaries of the winds, and accustomed to having to "beat to westward" until they cleared the bulge of Africa and could pick up the easterly trade winds.

The day had began auspiciously with their early start, and continued with fine sailing weather. As soon as dawn broke, Jack, mindful of his passengers, dispatched his carpenter and the new carpenter's mate, Newton, to rig up a temporary cabin for the unlikely pair. The carpenters quickly framed in a six-foot square on the main deck, next to the minuscule cabins allotted to the ship's officers and quartermaster, then used canvas to create its "walls." The little "cabin" even had its own "window"—an unused gun port. Jack appointed Chamba "Passenger Steward" for the duration of the voyage, instructing him to see to the needs of Ayisha and her friend.

By the time the ship reached blue water on the Atlantic, Jack left Second Mate Frank Connery in command, so he and

Robby could grab a few hours sleep. They emerged before noon, after breaking their fast, to find the ship on the starboard tack. The lower bulge of the African coast, which had been barely a smudge on the northern horizon, was gone. Jack was well satisfied with their progress, after checking the traverse board, the record of the chip log, and their compass heading. With any luck, the *Wench* would make more than a hundred miles by midnight.

Unfortunately, luck was against them.

As the sun dipped toward the western horizon, Jack and Robby were standing on the weather deck, going over the watch roster, when Chamba appeared, heading for the two men. When he reached Jack he hesitated before speaking, giving Robby Greene a swift glance. “You may speak in front of First Mate Greene,” Jack said. “I’ve apprised him of the situation regarding our passengers.”

Jack had filled Robby in on what was happening over breakfast in his cabin, including his hopes for a fast voyage north to Kerma. Robby had gotten a good laugh over Jack’s description of Caesar and his antics. “You should have sent me, Jack,” he’d said, amused. “Before I was ’pressed by our estimable Royal Navy to be a powder monkey, I used to ride the horses on my father’s farm.” He’d smiled slightly at the memory. “Of course, they were huge plow horses. Not nearly as…lively…as Caesar sounds.”

Jack had started to laugh with his first mate, then grimaced instead as muscles protested. “I agree, I should have sent you, mate. Then it would be *your* bum that feels as though it got keelhauled last night. I hope I never have to straddle one of those misbegotten jades again, and that’s the truth.”

Now, as evening approached, Chamba nodded at Jack. “Aye, Cap’n. Good evenin’, Mr. Robby.”

“So how are our passengers doing?” Robby asked.

“Mr. Tarek, he be doing pretty much fine, but Miss Ayisha, she lookin’ pretty peaky. Didn’t want no food. I got

her settled in her bunk, and she finally fall asleep."

"Bunk?" Jack said. "What bunk?"

"When Miss Ayisha see Tarek climb into his hammock, she say, 'I can't do that.' She say she too old to climb into such a contraption. So I speak to Mr. Newton, and he come back down and right quick nail together a bunk frame for her on the deck. I found an old straw tick in the ship's stores, and that's where she be lying, Cap'n."

Jack glanced at Robby. "Samuel Newton appears to be a find," he commented.

"He does, Cap'n," Robby agreed.

"I don't know why our passenger refused to climb into a hammock," Jack mused, grumpily. "The woman may have a face that could stop the clock on Saint Stephen's Tower, but she's spry for her age. She climbed aboard that infernal excuse for a bloody equine handily enough."

"Where be Saint Stephen's Tower, Cap'n?" Chamba wanted to know.

Jack and Robby had grown used to this over the past few months. The lad had more curiosity about the world than any ten cats. "It's in London, Chamba."

"There be a big clock there?"

"Yes, on the tower of Saint Stephen's."

"That be a church, Cap'n?"

Jack shook his head. "It used to be. But now the House of Commons meets there. It's all part of the Palace of Westminster."

"Never seen a palace," Chamba said. "I'd like to see one, me. The English king, he live there too? When we going to London next?"

Jack had just started to explain about how Westminster Palace was no longer the royal residence, when a cool breath of air brushed his ear, trailing along his cheek. Breaking off, he licked his finger and held it up. "Wind's freshening from the west, mates."

Robby and Chamba were staring over Jack's shoulders, their eyes widening. "Jack," Robby said. "We've got weather coming."

Jack turned to see a mass of clouds the color of a livid bruise boiling up from the west. From the looks of the storm, he judged they had between twenty and thirty minutes to prepare the *Wicked Wench*. "Looks like a good fresh gale," Jack observed, cheerfully. "Should blow some of this heat away, if we're fortunate." He glanced at Chamba. "We'll need all topmen aloft, lad."

"Aye, Cap'n!"

The *Wicked Wench* had all sails set, except for her very topmost canvas—the royals. "We'll need to take the t'gallants off, Captain, or we might lose them," Robby said, glancing upward at their spread of canvas. "If we have time," he added, uneasily.

Jack smiled at him. Not only was he not nervous, he felt exhilarated. This would be the *Wench*'s first serious storm under his command. He'd drilled his crew; they were ready. He hoped. "We'll have time," he said, sounding confident. "Don't worry, Robby. She's a good, weatherly ship." Then, more formally, he added, "Summon all hands, please, Mr. Greene. Instruct them to make storm canvas."

"Aye, Captain," Robby cupped his hands around his mouth. "All hands on deck!" he shouted. "Step lively now! All hands!" Moments later the clanging of the ship's bell reinforced his command.

Immediately, men began pouring onto the weather deck, some, who had been napping, blinking blearily in the reddish light. "Lads, we've got a gale coming!" Robby yelled. He pointed up. "All topmen! Shorten to storm canvas! Furl t'gallants! One reef in tops'ls and courses! Smartly, now, lads!"

Chamba was already halfway up the foremast. The other topmen scurried after the youth. The storm was moving fast; the *Wench*'s fifteen topmen would have their work cut

out to get the canvas on all three masts reefed before it struck. There weren't enough topmen to tackle more than one mast at a time, so these specialized hands had to move quickly, with no mistakes.

Jack, Robby, and Connery divided up the job of supervising the crew in order to make sure the *Wench* was as ready as possible to ride out the gale. Connery headed up to the quarterdeck to confer with the helmsman, assign a burly lee helmsman to assist with the wheel, and make sure the binnacle lantern was lit. After seeing that the topmen were working quickly and efficiently, Robby turned his attention to overseeing the men still on deck who were working with the lines to furl the jibs.

For his part, Jack strode around the weather deck, verifying that all hatches and equipment were being properly battened down. When he was satisfied that they were being attended to, the captain located the ship's cook, his carpenter, and the new seaman, Newton. They had no assigned tasks, and were standing on the weather deck watching the frenzied activity aloft, when the captain braced them. "You three, head down to the main deck, and check that all the guns and gun carriages are securely fastened. We don't want one breaking free, savvy, lads?"

"Aye, Cap'n!" chorused three voices as one, and they scattered. Cannon were so heavy that having one break free and go crashing about the deck during a storm could result in not only loss of life, but also a gaping hole in the hull, and a foundered ship.

The pleasantly cool breeze had now become a real wind, tugging at Jack's full sleeves, lashing at the canvas as the topmen worked, reefing the mainmast courses, having finished the foremast sails. Jack glanced west as lightning flickered, followed by the rumble of thunder. The setting sun was compressed to a lurid slash of crimson and coral by heavy-bellied purple clouds. As the rising wind whipped the

waves into whitecaps the *Wench*'s motion became more pronounced. She rolled like a barrel on a slope.

The topmen finished the mainmast, and swarmed up the mizzen. Minutes continued to tick by in Jack's head. Mentally, he ran through his list of storm readiness tasks, checking and rechecking that nothing had been overlooked. Westward, storm clouds now extended across more than half the sky, spreading like spilled ink. The *Wench* wasn't just rolling by now, she was frankly pitching, reminding Jack of Caesar, the demon horse.

Another crack of lightning illuminated the crewmen spread out along the mizzen lateen, the lowest of the mizzen sails. The resulting thunderclap sounded like cannon fire. *That's the last sail…hurry, lads!*

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Jack bellowed, "Lively, lively! Haul taut those bunt lines! Make fast the bunt gaskets! Lively, I said! Are you sailors or bloody grandsires? *Move*!" The ship lurched. Jack braced and balanced as she bucked beneath him. *Hurry, or you'll be blown right off that yardarm!*

The lateen was reefed! Jack watched the topmen scramble down the yard, moving to the mast along the yardarm. Then, seizing the ratlines, they climbed downward, hand over hand, legs dangling. During a break in the wind he could hear quick, panting gasps.

Bare feet hit the deck, slapping the planks. The last of the hands were down, and safe, scurrying below.

Jack breathed again, just in time to get slapped by a plume of salt spray. Lightning cracked nearly overhead, and the explosion of thunder followed right on its heels. Spitting out a mouthful of Atlantic, he grabbed for his hat, managing to catch it just before it took wing. The wind was shrieking and howling now, sounding like damned souls in some maritime hell. Ducking his head against the sudden silver curtain of rain, Jack ran across the deck to the starboard

ladder leading up to the quarterdeck, and bolted up it two steps at a time.

Three figures in tarred weather-gear awaited him. Jack's helmsman on watch, Matthews, grasped the spokes of the wheel, while the burly lee helmsman, Banks, stood off to the side to assist. Steering a ship through a gale was an arduous job, both physically and mentally taxing. The helmsman had to keep an eye on the angle of the waves, as well as how the wind filled the reefed courses, in order to keep the ship on the best heading. In addition to the two helmsmen, an ordinary seaman was assigned to the watch, and his job was to turn the hourglass every half hour, and update the traverse board with the course the helmsman reported.

Matthews stood with his legs braced, his bearded features tight with concentration as he and Banks worked at keeping the *Wench* angled properly. The *Wench* was taking the waves at roughly forty-five degrees, so the big swells rolled in beneath her starboard bow, then rolled out beneath her stern on the port side. Trying to head directly into the waves would pummel the vessel worse, might even break her in two, and taking the waves crosswise to them might cause her to capsize.

Matthews glanced sideways as Jack appeared beside him. "Bit of a blow, Cap'n!" He had to duck his head to keep water out of his mouth, and shout to be heard over the wind. Banks nodded at the captain, but didn't speak, concentrating on helping Matthews hold the wheel steady. Jack glanced over at the other figure swathed in the tarred weather-gear, and, by the dim glow of the binnacle-light, recognized Lucius Featherstone.

"Aye," Jack responded to Matthews, "Just a bit."

Even up here on the quarterdeck, salt spray flicked his face, slick and cold like the hand of a drowned corpse. It made the deck slippery, and with the way the wind was gusting, a man might fall and slide right over the side. Jack

cupped his hands around his mouth. “You need to put on safety lines, mates.”

Lucius passed the lines out, and they all tethered themselves, with Jack helping to steady the wheel as first Matthews, then Banks, secured theirs. Then Jack tied on his own line, tying the two half hitches and tugging, to make sure they weren’t going to slip. The *Wicked Wench* wasn’t pitching all that hard—yet. But this was just the beginning.

“Who’s on lookout?” he yelled, shielding his eyes from another splash of spray, and just making out a shadowy figure forward, by the windward rail.

The lookout was posted up toward the bow, and it was his job to watch for anything in the ship’s path—such as another vessel.

“It’s de Ver, Cap’n Sparrow,” Featherstone shouted back. “He should be fine up there. Everyone knows frogs like being wet.”

Jack rolled his eyes. *One day, I swear, I’m going to give them both lashes if they don’t stop*, he promised himself—though, truth to tell, he’d never yet ordered a crewman flogged.

The *Wench* heaved and rolled hard. Jack staggered, and this time had to grab a line to keep from being flung to his knees. Carefully, he crabbed sideways and looked down into the binnacle at the compass.

The compass needle was jerking wildly, as he’d expected. Jack watched it for more than a minute, noting where it pointed most often. He finally concluded that they were most likely moving south-southwest. Which, under the circumstances, was acceptable. He clapped Matthews on the back and shouted, “Stay on the wind, Matthews! We’re still making some westing, mate, despite this gentle shower! Just keep her as close to the wind as she’ll lie, and we’ll weather this just fine.”

Matthews laughed, got a mouthful of water, and spat off to port before replying, “Aye, Cap’n!”

Lightning bolts streaked the sky all around the plunging ship. Jack eyed the tops of his masts worriedly. They were certainly the tallest things out here. He'd seen masts and rigging struck before…had helped to remove and replace charred masts and spars when he'd first signed on as a merchant seaman.

Even worse than the thought of lightning hitting a mast was the possibility that it might hit the deck and travel, starting fires. And if a fire started anywhere near the powder magazine…

And I just laid on those two extra casks of powder, Jack recalled, ruefully. *If lightning ignites the powder magazine, there wouldn't be anything left except chum for the sharks…*After a moment, he shrugged. He couldn't do anything about the lightning, so he'd just put it out of his mind and hope for the best.

Featherstone called time, and turned the hourglass over, seating it carefully so it wouldn't roll off. Jack called out the course, and the ordinary seaman marked the traverse board with a peg.

Time passed. The storm worsened. The spray was nearly constant, lightning ripped the blackness, and blasts of thunder seemed to rattle human bones. Matthews and Banks wrestled with the wheel like a living opponent, grunting with the effort of keeping the ship on course. Gale winds could be capricious. If the *Wicked Wench* were blown north, the bulge of Africa lay in that direction. And if she went off course to the south, there was an island down there—Fernando Pó, named for the Portuguese explorer who had discovered it two hundred years ago. Islands meant shoal water. Being blown around in a gale was a sailor's nightmare.

Jack kept an eye on their course, while trying to tuck his chin at just the right angle so his hat would keep the rain out of his mouth and nose, but still protect the back of his neck—but a few minutes of experimentation proved this

feat to be impossible. Deciding it was better to breathe than drown, Jack gritted his teeth and endured the cold flood running down his back.

Every time the rain slacked off for a moment, he quickly glanced from port to starboard, to see if he could make out any sign of land. But there was nothing visible.

Jack could see that Matthews was tiring, so he tapped the helmsman on the shoulder. “I’ll take her until your watch ends,” he shouted.

Jack kept the wheel steady, trying to be as smooth as possible about it. If it hadn’t been for the lee helmsman, Banks, he’d never have been strong enough to keep the *Wench* steady.

Just as Lucius turned the hourglass over again, Jack saw moving light below them, coming up the ladder from the weather deck. Robby Greene came up, escorting the two fresh helmsmen. Prescott took the helm from Jack, and a big, well-muscled crewman whose name escaped Jack took Banks’s place as lee helmsman. Matthews, Banks, and Featherstone gratefully headed below.

“I’ll keep an eye on things up here, Jack,” Robby shouted. “You go below, get some rest.”

Jack shook his head. “I’d rather be up here, Robby,” he yelled. “You know me.”

Robby’s teeth flashed in the light of the lantern as he grinned, then he nodded, ruefully, and headed back down the ladder.

Jack had never been seasick for an instant. Not all crewmen were so lucky, though. In a bad gale, even experienced sailors could experience *mal de mer*, and Jack just didn’t want to be anywhere near puking seamen. Not to mention his passengers, who were undoubtedly sick as poisoned pups. As far as Jack was concerned, the lashing rain, howling wind, slashing lightning, and blasts of thunder were infinitely preferable to the sound and smell of human retching. He could have gone to his cabin, but it was too

rough to try to lie down, and he knew he'd just sit there, wondering what was happening on deck.

The night and the gale wore on. Men came and went as the watches changed. Jack stayed up on the quarterdeck.

Finally, after what seemed like days, the storm seemed to be lessening. Lightning was no longer striking directly overhead in long jagged tears, but had moved off to leeward. The moments between the lightning flashes and the booming of the thunder were increasing. The rain still fell in curtains, but it was falling straight most of the time now, rather than being driven nearly sideways by the wind.

Jack realized he was tiring. His empty stomach grumbled; he hadn't eaten since before noon, and his times spelling helmsmen at the wheel had sapped his energy. He checked their course again, and called it out so the ordinary seaman could mark it on the traverse board. Then he moved aft so he was leaning against the back of the quarterdeck, holding on with one hand. He was tempted to sit down, but he wasn't sure his aching legs would allow him to stand up again, so he stayed on his feet.

The rain was definitely slacking up, and so was the wind. Jack could now look up at the topmasts without nearly drowning. He still couldn't see much, but he thought all of them seemed intact.

The light of a lantern suddenly shone, as the relief watch arrived. It was two bells of the morning watch…the long night was nearly over. Jack squinted through the still-pelting rain, and saw Second Mate Connery, accompanied by Trafford and the stolid Banks. The helmsman currently on watch, Matthews again, headed down the ladder like a man who was looking forward to donning comparatively dry clothes and crawling into his hammock for a well-earned rest.

"Captain, by the time the rest of these clouds blow off, it'll be dawn," Connery said. "Why don't you get some rest? I can take it from here."

Jack smiled at the second mate, heartened by the realization that the *Wicked Wench* had indeed ridden out the storm, and that he'd soon be able to follow Matthews' example and head off to his cabin for dry clothes. Not to mention a few belts of rum, which would warm him up better than anything else. "Just a good fresh gale, Frank," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "Nothing to be concerned about."

Connery gave a bark of laughter. "If there was nothing to be concerned about, why are you wearing a safety line, Cap'n?"

Jack chuckled wearily as he struggled to undo the water-swollen half-hitches. "Have to set a good example for the crew, Mr. Connery!"

The rain continued to slacken. Together they checked the compass heading. The *Wench* was still on course—more or less.

After ordering Connery to have the crew check for storm damage as soon as the sun rose, Jack cautiously made his way down the portside ladder, then turned right to open his cabin door.

Inside his cabin, he found his flint and steel and struck a light, then lit his lantern. He was pleased to discover that not much water had come in through the windows. He opened one of them a bit, to get some fresh air, then shivered in the breeze as he peeled off his sopping clothes. There was no place to hang them, so he spread them on the deck, then rummaged in his sea chest until he found drawers and an old shirt and pulled them on. His stomach growled again, so he took out a chunk of cheese and some bread, then uncorked a bottle of rum—ordinary EITC-issued rum. There was no point in bringing out the good stuff just to warm him up.

After he'd eaten a bit, and had several pulls from the bottle, Jack felt much better. Recorking the bottle, he crawled into his bunk, pulling the bedclothes up. He was still

chilled from being wet through all night. *Good thing we're off Africa*, he thought, woozily, *instead of Greenland or Cape Horn….*

Realizing he'd left his lantern burning, Jack cursed softly, then crawled wearily out of the bunk and crossed the cabin to blow out the flame. As he did so, he heard a distant rumble of thunder, low and menacing like the far-off growling of some ancient monster. Thoughts of monsters brought back memories of Davy Jones, when he'd seen him summoned to appear on *Troubadour*'s main deck. Distant thunder had been growling there, too, as he and Esmeralda had walked back down the gangplank, still hand-in-hand….

Thunder rumbled, off to the north, grumbling like a hungry, caged beast. "I need a drink," Jack said, as he and Esmeralda picked their way along the uneven planks of the dock.

"I could use one also," Esmeralda admitted. "I know I shall have nightmares, Jack. That face…" she shuddered.

"I know. I thought Davy Jones was a man," Jack said. "Not some kind of…creature. The legends don't mention the way he looks."

She shivered again, and Jack tightened his hold on her hand. The wind had picked up, and Jack realized the sun was setting outside the caldera. The storm had blown cooler, dryer air into Shipwreck Cove. "Let's go back to *Venganza*," Esmeralda said. "I want to change my clothes, and get a shawl. Then, perhaps you'd take me up to The Drunken Lady?"

"It would be my pleasure, love," Jack said. "But…I find myself just a bit out of pocket, as they say."

"What does that mean?" she asked. "You English have such strange expressions."

Jack looked down at his feet, scowling. "Means I haven't a peso to me name, darlin'," he admitted.

She laughed, then hastily put her hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t laughing at you.”

“Yes, you were, and I don’t blame you a bit,” Jack said. “I’m perpetually impoverished, love. Can’t hang on to money to save me life.”

She smiled at him. “I’ll buy the drinks,” she said.

“That wouldn’t be proper,” Jack protested, not very forcefully.

“Why not? Pirates are always buying each other drinks.”

Jack waited at the foot of *Venganza*’s gangplank while Esmeralda went aboard. She reappeared eventually, wearing the rose-colored gown she’d worn the first time he’d seen her, with an ivory shawl flung over her shoulders. She came down the gangplank cautiously, and he put out a hand to help her step off. “That’s the dress you were wearing the day you arrived at Shipwreck Cove,” Jack said.

“It is.” She gave him a sideways glance. “Do you like it?”

“I do,” he said. “That dress is nearly as beautiful as what’s inside it.”

Esmeralda’s eyes widened. “Oh, Jack,” she said. “You’ll spoil me. That pretty speech was worthy of Christophe.”

“The difference is that I said it because it happens to be true.” His tone was wry as he offered her his arm.

When they reached The Drunken Lady, Jack was surprised to find Steve Seymour cooking and tending bar, and the pimply-faced youth waiting tables. There was no sign of Marie. Jack headed up to the bar. “Good evening, mate,” he said. “Two rum punches, please.”

As Steve placed the filled tankards before them, Esmeralda laid some coins on the bar. “Where is Marie?” she asked, glancing around. Seeing the expression that crossed Steve’s broad, good-natured features, she added, “I hope she’s well?”

The tall, burly tavern keeper hesitated, then replied, gruffly, “Thank you for your concern, Lady Esmeralda. I’m

sorry to tell you, the missus ain’t feeling well tonight.”

“Where is she? What ails her? Can I be of help?” Esmeralda asked.

Steve mopped up spilled drink from the bar with a filthy rag. “I’d rather not say, miss,” he said, finally.

Jack stared at the barman in some alarm. He’d never seen Steve like this before; he was usually a cheerful soul. Now he appeared strained, almost haunted.

“Could I please see her?” Esmeralda insisted. “Perhaps she might wish to have another woman attend to her?”

Steve hesitated again, and Jack realized he was trying to think of a polite way to decline. Before he could speak, however, Marie herself opened the door that led to the Seymour living quarters. The Frenchwoman’s face was bruised, her eyes were red and swollen, her hair lay loose on her shoulders instead of confined in a cap, and she clutched a shawl around her as though she were cold. Marie beckoned to Esmeralda, trying to smile, but the effort failed. With a murmur of distress, Esmeralda hastened toward her.

Jack wasn’t sure whether the invitation to visit the living quarters included him, but he decided to act as though it did. Picking up both tankards, he followed in the wake of Esmeralda’s rustling satin skirts.

Jack had never been in the Seymour living quarters before. The room they entered appeared to be set up as a parlor. It was small and plainly furnished, but there were some colorful rugs on the wooden deck, a couple of paintings on the wall, and several chairs. Marie sat down in a rocking chair, and waved at the other seats. “Please, sit,” she said. “Thank you for your concern.”

Jack sat down on a low hassock at the foot of the chair Esmeralda chose. He passed Esmeralda her apparently forgotten tankard, then took a sip from his own. The liquor burned pleasantly down his gullet into his stomach, and he felt himself start to relax.

Esmeralda took a tiny, ladylike sip, then put the tankard down. “Marie, my dear,” she said, “you look so upset. What is wrong?” Leaning forward, she extended both hands.

Marie took her hands and squeezed them, choking back a sob. Her voice was tight with anger when she said, “I shouldn’t be so upset, Esmeralda, nothing really *happened*. My face hurts, that is all.” She put a hand to the mark on her cheek. Jack eyed it, guessing she would probably have a shiner by tomorrow. “*Mais…zut alors*! He frightened me half to death! I don’t know what would have happened if Steve hadn’t come back from running errands!”

Jack frowned. “Who are you speaking of, Marie?” he asked, taking another draught of the punch.

“Oh! I thought Etienne told you…it was Christophe. He came by a few hours ago, while Steve was gone. He’d been drinking. A lot. He…he…” Marie’s face twisted, and she controlled her voice with an effort. “He told me it was time to *earn* that doubloon he gave me. You remember, Jacques?”

Jack nodded.

“Then he…he grabbed me.” She shook her head. “I tried to get away. I demanded that he let me go, and leave, but he just…laughed.”

Esmeralda’s eyes were wide with shock. She traded glances with Jack, who shrugged, making it clear he’d known nothing of Christophe’s intentions. “*Dios mio*, Marie,” she whispered. “I am so sorry! Did he…did he …”

Marie shook her head. “No. I slapped him when he wouldn’t let me go, and he laughed more, and then he…he slapped me back.” She touched her cheek, gingerly. “While I was stunned from the blow, he grabbed my dress. He put his hand…” She broke off, biting her lip. “I pulled away, and the shoulder of my dress, it tore. Then I was free.”

Marie took a deep breath. “I was going to scream. But then we both heard Steve returning. Christophe, he bowed to me, *le pou*, and then he ran out the other way. Thank *le*

bon Dieu my husband came back. I really think if he hadn't, Christophe, he would have violated me."

"Oh, Marie!" When Esmeralda moved over and hugged the other woman, Marie put her head on her friend's shoulder and broke down.

Jack stared at the weeping Frenchwoman in consternation. It was difficult to reconcile Marie's account of Christophe's behavior with the man he knew—the man he still, despite their rivalry for Esmeralda's affections, thought of as his closest friend. Of course, Marie *did* say Christophe was drunk when he accosted her. Drunken men often acted stupidly, as Jack had good reason to know. He shook his head, mystified. There were so many willing women here in Shipwreck City…why would Christophe try to force his attentions on the one woman that wasn't available—or willing? But…drunken men were known to act irrationally, as well as stupidly.

After a few minutes of crying, Marie sat up, dabbing at her eyes and nose with a handkerchief. "Look at me, a fountain of tears," she said, and laughed, albeit shakily. "I do not know why I am so silly…" Then she smiled, and fresh tears flowed. "Unless it is because…" Blushing, she leaned over and whispered softly in Esmeralda's ear.

"*Really*?" Esmeralda gasped. "Oh, Marie! How wonderful!" They hugged again. "Have you told him?"

The older woman shook her head, no, then wiped away fresh tears. But this time, she didn't seem upset, she seemed *happy*. Jack stared at the Frenchwoman, baffled. Why would Marie want to tell Christophe anything after such an unpleasant encounter?

After hearing the ladies whisper, their exchanges marked by giggles and tears on both sides, Jack mentally shrugged and gave up, concentrating instead on his rum. Drinking was something he understood. When he finished his tankard, he nudged Esmeralda and said, "You've

forgotten your drink, love. Best finish it up. We'll need to be getting you back to *Venganza*."

"Oh, yes," she said absently, and, picking it up, she took a few more sips, then handed it to Jack. "You finish it for me, Jack. It's making my head spin."

Jack was happy to oblige.

Minutes later, Marie escorted them to the door of the living quarters, hugged Esmeralda farewell, and smiled shyly at Jack. They left the living quarters and Jack plunked the empty tankards down on the bar as they passed.

The place had grown crowded while they'd been talking to Marie. Jack and Esmeralda began making their way through the crowd of unwashed, scruffy pirate bodies.

"Jack…Jack! Hallo, Jack!" came a gravelly voice with a West Country accent from behind them.

Jack turned to see Captain Barbossa standing there, grinning broadly. The older pirate politely doffed his hat to Esmeralda. "Hallo, missy."

"Hallo, Hector," Jack said, smiling back. "Why so happy?"

"Didn't ye hear the news, Jack?"

"News?"

"Ah! Let me be the first t'tell ye, then. Seems that when Cap'n Teague's men took our condemned friend Borya down t' the dungeons to question him, the little coward sang like a songbird—before they could even heat up the irons or ready the rack! Gave up his confederates and disclosed where and when they're supposed t'gather to divide up their swag. 'Tis some little island, east nor'east of Cuba."

"So Teague knows the identities of the other rogues?" Jack was stunned.

"He does. Cap'n Teague told me he plans on taking a fleet out to their rendezvous. They'll hide and wait for them all to come sailing in and anchor. Then Teague's fleet will swoop in and capture the lot of the Code-breaking blackguards." Barbossa smiled again, but this expression

was anything but pleasant. “I’m goin’ with him. Some of those misbegotten scurvy knaves will no doubt put up a fight, and I’d like nothin’ better than to skewer a few. And best believe I intend to help with puttin’ nooses around the necks of the survivors!”

Esmeralda took a breath. “I can hardly believe he just… gave them up. Why would he do that?”

Barbossa snorted derisively. “Methinks the Russian figured he had naught to lose, and hadn’t the backbone to face being questioned. Perhaps he wanted to face Davy Jones with an intact skin.”

“I confess I’m surprised,” Jack said. “He seemed… defiant…during the proceedings today.”

“I figure seein’ Davy Jones face to face had much t’ do with it, Jack,” Barbossa said. “’Twould take the defiance out of most buccaneers, eh?”

“Without a doubt,” Jack agreed.

“So, can I buy ye and the lady a drink, Jack? I figure I owe ye, for helpin’ me gain vengeance for me poor little Polly.” Clearly, Barbossa had already been imbibing. His eyes were bright, and so was his nose. “Perhaps ye’d like something t’eat?”

“I have to take Esmeralda back to *Venganza*,” Jack said. “But we can join you for just a moment, Hector.”

Barbossa led the way to a full table, and stood before it. The five pirates there were drinking and talking animatedly, but, one by one, they noticed the scarred captain standing there. When all of them fell silent, staring at him, Barbossa gave a quick, sideways jerk of his thumb. Silently, they got up and left.

Jack was impressed, but not terribly surprised. There were stories about Captain Barbossa…how tough he was, how wily, how deviously manipulative. All the accounts also agreed that he was one hell of a dirty fighter.

The three of them took their seats. “What can I be orderin’ for ye?” Barbossa asked. “Food, wine…the two of ye

did me a service today, and I'm mindful of it." Putting two fingers in his mouth, he whistled, and the pimply-faced serving lad appeared immediately.

"Nothing for us, Hector," Jack said. "We can't stay that long. But what Steve had on the fire for dinner smelled good, I'll tell you."

"A bottle of your best rum," Barbossa said, and the lad vanished. "'Tis thirsty I am, not hungry, Jack. Had me supper not long ago with Cap'n Borya."

"You *what*?" Jack and Esmeralda stared at him in undisguised amazement.

"Aye, I did. Seems he was entitled to a last request, as well as a last meal and drink. Borya requested that I be allowed to join him in his final repast. We shared a bottle of that awful clear swill he drinks. Vodka, he calls it," Barbossa said. The serving lad reappeared and poured Barbossa and Jack a drink. Esmeralda shook her head when she was offered a glass. "Leave the bottle," the captain ordered.

"Why did Borya make seeing you his last request?" Esmeralda asked. "That seems so strange, after what he did."

"Aye, missy, it does, doesn't it? Seems Borya had the sinking of me *Cobra* on his conscience, and he wanted me t' know he was sorry for it. Apologized most sincerely, he did. Cap'n Teague was there, as witness, and he told him that if the Pirate Lords agreed, he thought *Koldunya* should be passed on to me, so I wouldn't be a cap'n without a vessel. That's like bein' a fish with no water, he said." Barbossa sighed. "We used to be good friends, once, I told you that, Jack."

"Yes, you did. But I'd never have expected Borya to apologize," Jack said.

"He did. He told me he truly regretted the greed he felt when he saw how me *Cobra* was ridin' low in the water, her holds filled with booty. He was sorry he broke the Code, he said."

“Amazing!” Esmeralda exclaimed.

“Bloody incredible,” Jack said.

“’Tis true, I swear it.” Barbossa put a big, long-nailed hand over the leather strap of his baldric, in the approximate location of his heart. “I could hardly believe it meself. Oh, and he gave me this, said it was his most precious token. His mind must be addled, is all I can say.” Reaching into his coat, Barbossa fumbled for a moment, and brought out a small, square block of wood, about an inch and a half on the side.

Jack looked at it, then looked sideways at Esmeralda. She was staring at it, wide-eyed. As she caught Jack’s gaze, she nodded, as if confirming his unspoken question.

“Hector, does Captain Teague know Borya gave you this?” Jack asked.

“No, he wasn’t in the cell at that moment, he’d stepped outside.”

“You need to be careful of that little token,” Jack said. “Don’t lose it. Show it to Captain Teague as soon as you can. He’ll tell you what it is.”

Barbossa turned the little block over in his fingers. “You say this is important? Looks like junk.”

“It is important, Hector. Unless I’m much mistaken, that is one of the Nine Pieces of Eight.”

Barbossa frowned. “And what might those be, Jack?”

“They’re important,” Jack assured him. “Teague will explain.”

“Very well,” Barbossa said. Curiosity flared in his eyes, but he stowed the little bit of wood away. “Been an eventful day, hasn’t it, Jack?”

Jack nodded. “It has.”

“I’ll tell ye, I never thought Borya was the type to turn songbird and out all his secrets, without even a touch of the brand or the rack,” Barbossa said, thoughtfully. “And I was knocked for six when I found out who the second rogue was. Never spent any time with the fellow, but he’d seemed a

decent sort…for a Frenchman. Who'd have thought he'd have murdered poor old Tommy?"

Jack's heart seemed to halt for a moment, then stutter rapidly. He found he was holding on to the table, and it was hard to breathe. "Borya gave up the second rogue that Davy Jones spoke of ? The one he said was here in Shipwreck Cove? Who…who was it?"

Barbossa's weather-beaten countenance was full of cheerful malice. He chortled. "Turns out it was that popinjay, styles himself de Rapièr. That foppish dandy must've twigged that the Little Butcher might sing, 'cause he was caught with his longboats out, towing his brigantine, tryin' to make it to the tunnel and clean away. But Teague's men blocked him, and took him into custody. Searched his vessel. They found that turquoise coat me man Ragetti was talkin' about hidden in his cabin, too." Barbossa filled his glass and sipped. "That was enough for Teague. He condemned him to swing with Borya."

"Oh…" Jack managed. Turning away from Barbossa, his eyes met Esmeralda's. He gave a quick, sideways jerk of his head, and she nodded slightly.

"You're sure you won't have another round with me? If it hadn't been for you two, they'd never have been caught," Barbossa proposed.

Jack stood up, managing a semblance of a smile as he offered his hand to Esmeralda to help her rise. His face felt frozen. "Thank you very much, Hector, but I fear I must get my lady back to her grandfather. Perhaps another time?"

Barbossa grinned. "Any time, Jack!" He winked at them. "You lovebirds run along and have a good time. You're only young once, remember that." He took another swig of rum, then beckoned the serving boy. "Lad! Bring me a couple of nice crisp apples, if you've got any!"

Jack and Esmeralda hastened out of The Drunken Lady and stood outside in the narrow hallway, staring at each other speechlessly. Esmeralda was pale with shock.

“Jack, this is terrible,” she said, finally, breaking the silence. “I know that I said I didn’t want to spend time with Christophe anymore, but still…the thought of tomorrow, at dawn…” She shook her head.

“I can’t believe he’s guilty,” Jack said. “It’s not as though Davy Jones identified him. And Borya…after seeing Borya during the inquiry, I wouldn’t trust him to empty a chamber pot. He did nothing but lie!”

“Borya lied, yes,” Esmeralda agreed. “Jack, it is not as though I would ever speak to Christophe again, after hearing what he did to Marie…but this…this is just not right.”

“Speaking of Marie,” Jack said, “what was going on in there? You two were laughing, then you were crying…” He spread his hands and shrugged.

Esmeralda’s expression lightened. “Oh, Jack…you really didn’t understand?”

“No, I bloody well did not,” Jack said, nettled. “I’d appreciate being enlightened.”

Esmeralda smiled slightly. “Marie is with child. It is no wonder she goes from laughter to tears by the moment. From what I have heard, that often happens.”

Jack blinked. “She’s going to have a *baby*?”

“Yes, isn’t that wonderful? Steve will be so happy when he finds out.”

“He doesn’t know?”

“She will tell him when the time is right.”

Jack tried to imagine hearing such news with joy, and failed. It sounded like a disaster. All he knew of childbirth was that it was dangerous, messy, and it took away one’s freedom. Something that any sane person would avoid at all costs. But Esmeralda was clearly happy for her friend, so he decided discretion was the better part of valor, and returned to the subject at hand. “I want to talk to Christophe. Maybe he can explain why Borya would say he’s the second rogue.”

“I agree. Christophe should be given the right to explain himself. It’s not right for Captain Teague to sentence him to hang, based on just the word of a condemned man who gave him up rather than be tortured.”

Jack leaned against the ancient wood of the old galleon that made up part of The Drunken Lady. From inside, he could hear the sounds of inebriated revelry. “It’s completely unfair!” he burst out, after a moment. “So typical of Teague!” He heard the bitterness in his own voice, but for once, didn’t try to hide it. “Esmeralda, I can’t count the number of times he’s condemned me, when I wasn’t to blame. And this time it means a man’s *life*.”

Jack almost spat in disgust, but resisted because it was vulgar, and because Esmeralda was there. “To hang a man because he’s accused by a known liar, captains a brigantine, and owns a turquoise coat—that’s no kind of justice.”

“When you say it like that, it does sound…” Esmeralda hesitated, “what is your English word? Ah, yes. Circumstantial, that is the word.”

Jack nodded. “Christophe should be allowed to face his accusers. Even Davy Jones, if necessary. Give him the chance to defend himself. Condemning him to hang without an inquiry isn’t right.”

Jack began pacing up and down the corridor, thinking hard. Could he go to Don Rafael and the other Pirate Lords and ask them to hold a Board of Inquiry? He had a feeling that none of them would agree to summon Davy Jones again, which was probably the only way Christophe could be cleared of the charges. The Frenchman had been with him and Esmeralda for the first part of the night that Old Tommy had been murdered. Perhaps he’d been with other friends after that, and they could swear to it? Then Christophe would have a…what was it called? An alibi. But that was for the future. What Jack had to do now was make sure Christophe wasn’t in his cell when they came for him at

dawn—otherwise any alibi Jack could produce would come too late.

“I’m going down to the dungeons to see Christophe,” Jack said. “I want to hear his side of things.”

“Do you think they’ll let you see him?”

“They let Barbossa in to see Borya. Teague’s men serve as the guards down there. They know me.”

Even as he answered Esmeralda’s question, Jack’s mind was racing. *But even if you can get in to see him, and it turns out he can explain everything, and has an alibi, what good would that do, without the key to the cell?*

He knew where the ring of keys was—in the prison dog’s mouth. And he, Jack Sparrow, was one of two people in the world that Teague’s cur would accept food and drink from. He’d fed the dog many times. What if he fed the dog tonight? And got the keys?

Jack’s mouth went dry at the thought of going against the Code, and the Keeper of the Code. But, dammit, Christophe was his *friend*, and he was trapped in a web of lies, condemned without a chance to be heard. He had to do something to help him.

I’ll go there prepared, Jack decided. *I’ll talk to Christophe, see what his story is. I’m a good judge of people. I’ll be able to tell if he’s telling the truth or lying. And if he’s innocent, I’ll help him. Can’t let him face that noose at dawn.*

Jack turned to Esmeralda, who had been standing there, watching him. “I hate to have to ask you this, darlin’,” he said, “but it’s not for me, it’s for Christophe. Can I borrow some money?”

“Of course!” Esmeralda turned her back to him, and, a moment later, turned back with a small silk bag in her hand. It clinked softly, and was obviously heavy for its size. “How much do you need?”

“What coins do you have?”

“I have eight pesos,” she said, spilling them into her hand. “How many do you need?”

Jack gaped. The peso, also known as the *ocho reales*, or piece of eight, was a heavy silver coin, and, except for the doubloon, the most valuable currency in the New World. The reason they were called “pieces of eight” was that their faces were marked with lines, so they could be cut into eight roughly equal pieces. Eight pesos was a *lot* of money—enough to buy two bulls, or an unbroken horse. “Neptune’s nightgown, love! You can’t go flashing that much money here! This is Shipwreck City! Are you mad?”

She shrugged. “Anyone *loco* enough to put his hand where I carry this purse would draw back naught but a stump, Jack,” she said, coolly. “Money is not the only thing I conceal beneath my clothes.”

Jack had no trouble believing that. “Still, that’s too much money to be carrying around here,” he cautioned. “Put them away, quick. I’ll only need one of those.”

She handed him two coins. “Take these,” she said. “You might need an extra.”

“All right, love,” Jack said. “You wait here, and I’ll be right back.” Turning, he opened the door to The Drunken Lady, and vanished into the roistering throng.

He returned only minutes later, carrying a bottle, and a smallish packet of oiled paper. “All set, love,” he said. “Now we need to head for *Troubadour*.”

They hurried through the twilight, along the docks, until they reached Teague’s vessel. Jack offered Esmeralda his arm, and they mounted the gangplank. He smiled at the man on watch. “Good evening, Rufus. Just going to give Don Rafael’s granddaughter a little tour.”

Rufus nodded, and politely tipped his hat. “Good evening, Lady Esmeralda.”

Jack escorted Esmeralda around the weather deck for a few minutes, playing tour guide, then they descended the ladder to the main deck. Teague’s captain’s cabin was at the

stern on this deck. Keeping a weather eye out for crewmen who might be present, Jack conducted his “tour,” until he reached the door of the Keeper of the Code’s cabin. Falling silent, he put his finger over his lips.

Teague kept a spare key to his cabin, and Jack knew where to retrieve it. Moving silently, he did so, then paused and whispered to Esmeralda, “I’ll be a few minutes, love. Please go over to the ladder and listen for Teague to come back, so you can warn me. Four knocks on the door.”

She nodded. Taking off her light-colored shawl, she bundled it up so she wouldn’t be visible in the gloom, and headed back for the ladder leading up to the weather deck.

Jack unlocked Teague’s cabin, feeling a trickle of cold sweat course down his back. Aiding a condemned man’s escape was a violation of the Code. He’d face the noose himself if his role were ever discovered. Slipping inside, he relocked the door.

Teague’s cabin was spacious. *Troubadour* was wide-beamed, and the cabin was almost as wide as it was long. There was still enough light coming in from the big stern windows so Jack could make his way confidently. He glanced around, seeing it was still the same as he remembered from his last visit, almost a year ago. The Keeper had furnished it with unusual objects from around the world, especially those that reflected his love of music. His beloved guitar was secured to the bulkhead by sturdy brackets, so it couldn’t fall when the ship rolled.

Teague’s cabin also boasted an unusually large captain’s pantry. There was enough room for a man to step inside and close the door. Jack had hidden in the pantry more than once as a lad, eavesdropping on the Keeper’s conversations. He still wasn’t sure whether Teague had ever realized he was in there.

Jack’s quarry lay on an expensive wool rug from Turkey, eyeing him. The gray mongrel had raised his head as Jack entered the cabin, and was now looking at him alertly. The

ring of keys dangled from his mouth, jingling slightly. As Jack approached, his tail thumped faintly on the rug. *Good. He still knows me*, Jack thought.

"Hey, doggy!" he murmured. "How you doing, boy? Been a while, hasn't it?" The dog's tail thumped harder.

Squatting down beside the dog, Jack stroked his head. He wagged his tail as Jack scratched his ears, grinning with doggy pleasure. *Maybe*, Jack thought, *I won't need the bottle.*

"Well, aren't you the *best* doggy!" Jack cooed, still petting. "Remember when we used to go for walks together?"

Of course Jack didn't really believe that this was the same dog as the one he'd petted, fed, and taken on boyish expeditions when he was a little shaver. Of course not. But it *was* odd. Wherever Teague got his dogs, there must be a breed of them, because this mutt looked *exactly* like the one Jack had played with when he was six, and eight, and ten, and twelve….

Jack shrugged. The prison dog was yet another of the many mysteries of life with the Keeper of the Code. He'd learned long ago not to ask questions, because Teague's reply was invariably the same: "Sea turtles, mate!"

Experimentally, Jack let his hand drift down toward the ring of keys. Before he could even touch the metal, the dog's lip lifted to reveal good-sized teeth, and an emphatic growl warned him off.

"Fine," Jack said. "We'll play it your way, doggy. Good thing I came prepared. How about some dinner, eh, boy?"

He stood up and went over to the dog's water bowl and food dish. There was water in the bowl, but the dish was empty. "Look what I brought for you!" he said, taking out the parcel. "Some of Steve Seymour's best beef ragout. His wife is French, you know. Cooks everything with cream and wine." Opening the oiled parchment, he dumped the food into the bowl. It smelled so good that Jack's stomach

growled. The prison dog's ears pricked up, but he didn't drop the keys. Jack knew he wouldn't do that while a human other than Teague was within grabbing distance.

"And guess what else I brought you?" Jack said. "Your *favorite*. Rum. The really *good* stuff." Uncorking the bottle, releasing the heady scent, Jack poured a splash of rum over the dog's dinner, then added an extra dollop, to make sure. "See how you like that!"

Rising to his feet, Jack backed away, until he was leaning against the cabin door. Cautiously, he took a sip of the rum himself, knowing that it was extremely potent and he had nothing in his stomach. It tasted delicious, and he was tempted to take another sip, but he reminded himself that he needed a clear head.

Seeing that Jack was out of key-grabbing range, the dog sniffed the food, and his tail wagged eagerly. Dropping the ring of keys, he began wolfing down his supper. It took him less than a minute to polish it off, and lick the dish so clean it looked like it had been scrubbed.

Now we wait, Jack thought, nervously. He was very conscious of time passing. Teague could be back any minute. He knew better than to dash across the room and try to grab the keys. The dog was faster than he was.

The dog took a few laps of water, then picked up the ring of keys again, and moved back to his customary place on the Turkish rug, standing there, cocking his head at Jack. Then he yawned, so widely Jack could see all the way down his throat. But somehow the mutt managed to hang onto the keys.

Jack began talking to the dog again. "Hey, doggy, a nap would be good after such a great dinner, wouldn't it? I'd love one meself, frankly. It's been a long day."

The dog yawned again, and this time Jack yawned with him, hearing his jaw crack.

"Now you've got me doing it," he mumbled. "Am I going to have to sing you a bloody lullaby, doggy?"

The dog shook his head, seeming a bit unsteady on his paws. He turned in a circle. Once, twice…usually he turned three times, but this time he gave up at two, and flopped down, eyes closing. In another minute he dropped the keys, rolled over onto his side, and began to snore.

Jack darted forward and grabbed the keys. The dog stayed safely in the Land of Nod. Backing up, Jack began to tuck the ring inside the waistband of his britches for concealment.

Rap…rap…rap…rap…

Cursing, Jack yanked the keys out of his britches, laying them carefully beside the somnolent canine. Then he spun around and unlocked the door. Esmeralda was standing there, her hand raised to knock again. “Hurry!” she whispered. “They’re coming down the ladder!”

Jack reached out, grabbed her by the wrist, and yanked her inside the cabin, then relocked the door. Quickly he pulled her across the room, avoiding the snoring dog, then opened the door to the captain’s pantry. Pushing her inside, he stepped in after her, and shut the door.

It was close quarters. They were squeezed together, the shelves at their backs, and the closed door six inches from their noses. But for the moment, they were safe.

Jack heard the key scratch in the cabin’s lock, then the door opened, and Teague entered. The Keeper lit a lantern, then walked around the cabin for several minutes, once pausing to say hello to the dog, but apparently the sight of his pet asleep didn’t rouse any suspicion. His steps neared the door to the pantry and Jack and Esmeralda froze, terrified, but he didn’t open the door. Instead he headed over to the bulkhead. Jack heard him take down his guitar, then the mattress rustled as Teague sat down on the bed. Moments later, he began strumming the guitar, tuning it. After a few minutes, he began playing a soft, haunting ballad of lost love.

Hearing the music, Jack frowned. Surely Teague had not come back to retire for the night. The evening was still young.

He turned his head, very conscious of Esmeralda pressed up against him. His chin brushed her forehead, and, unable to resist, he nuzzled his face against the silk of her hair.

Jack was surprised when he felt her fingers reach up and touch his shirt, not far from his navel, then he felt a tug at the fabric and realized she'd undone a button. A finger slid inside his shirt, caressing his belly, sliding softly across it, stroking. His breath caught, and he gritted his teeth, remembering that he couldn't move, or make any sound.

In response, he turned a little, sliding his arm around her, pulling her even closer. His hand slipped soundlessly over her satin sleeve, to her waist, then moved upward. He kissed her temple, feeling the fine, short hairs there tickle his mouth.

Esmeralda's fingers moved again, and another button of his shirt was undone. She slid her hand up, over his ribs. It was maddening, to touch each other like this, without being able to speak, or make a sound. Jack's head swam, whether from the close air, or because Esmeralda's skin was so soft and warm—he didn't know. His thinking mind seemed to have vanished….

And all the while the guitar strummed, the music speaking of love, and loss, and passion.

Jack delicately kissed his way down her face, her brows, her eyelids, her cheeks, a brush across the lips, her chin, then he pressed his mouth against her ear, feeling the metal of her earring against his lower lip. Delicately, he touched his tongue to her earlobe, then again, traced the outer shell of her ear. He felt her fingers tighten against the skin of his chest, and she swayed slightly. He tightened his hold even more, steadying her.

There was a knock on Teague's door. Jack and Esmeralda froze, listening, as the music stopped. "Who is it?" Teague called.

"Mortensen, Captain Teague."

Jack recognized the name of one of Teague's senior lieutenants, the man in charge of the dungeons, and prisoner interrogations.

"Come in," Teague commanded.

Jack heard the cabin door open, and footsteps. "Captain Teague, I've come about the prisoner, de Rapièr."

"What is it?" Teague asked.

"He's made his last request, which you said he was to be allowed, Captain. He wants to see your—that is, he wants to see Jack Sparrow. Will you permit that?"

Teague was silent for a moment, then he spoke. "Very well," he said. "But I want you there when they talk. I don't trust Jacky not to try something stupid."

"Aye, Captain Teague. I'll not leave him alone with de Rapièr." Mortensen paused, then asked, with forced casualness. "Um, by the way, sir, do you know where Jacky might be? I sent men out, but we haven't been able to locate him."

"He's usually in The Drunken Lady," Teague said, dismissively. "Drinking."

"Aye, Captain Teague. We tried there. Captain Barbossa said he had been there, but he'd left."

"Try the brothels," Teague said. "He's probably tumbling some trollop."

Standing there, his hand touching Esmeralda's warm, fragrant skin, Jack was embarrassed, even as he had to fight a hysterical urge to burst out laughing at the sheer absurdity of the moment. He felt Esmeralda's body shake, and for a moment he thought she was weeping, but then he realized she, too, was fighting not to laugh.

"Aye, Captain," Mortensen was saying.

The bunk creaked, then booted feet hit the deck. Jack heard the faint thrum of guitar strings as the Keeper hung the guitar back on the wall. “I’ll walk back with you,” Teague said. “Captain Villaneuva was hosting a game of Hazard tonight, aboard his vessel. Jacky boy might be there. I’ll check.”

Two pairs of booted feet crossed the deck. The narrow crack of light marking the edge of the door shifted, then went out, as Teague took the lantern with him. The cabin door shut. Jack heard the lock click.

Neither he nor Esmeralda moved. Jack counted in his head. When he reached two minutes, he let out a sigh and relaxed slightly.

“How long should we wait to make sure he’s not going to come back?” Esmeralda whispered.

Jack was still mentally counting. He figured four minutes, to be sure Teague was really gone. “Another minute or two more, love,” he replied, softly. “Just wait….”

She stirred against him. “Jack, I can’t wait. I want…”

“Be patient, love.” Gritting his teeth, Jack forced himself to keep counting.

Four minutes.

“Now,” he said, and pulled her against him, his mouth finding hers in the dark, cramped space. Her lips moved, parting. Jack tightened his hold, kissing her until his head swam. She tasted faintly of rum punch.

Her arms slid up around his neck, holding on tightly, and she returned his kisses. They were breathing hard, gasping in the close darkness. He kissed her throat, her shoulder, and felt her undoing the last buttons on his shirt. Her fingers slid across his shoulder. She whispered his name, then she muttered something in Spanish, an endearment, he thought, though he was too distracted to translate it.

Jack’s world slid sideways, past and future spiraling away, his mind spinning out of control. He could not see, but he could hear, and taste, and touch, and that was more than

enough. The slickness and rustle of satin, the softness of silk, then the even softer feel of fragrant skin, and the touch of long hair falling over his shoulders. Esmeralda was more intoxicating than an entire bottle of the best rum ever distilled, and he lost himself in her.

Later, he stood there, still holding her, reluctant to let her go. The world that had spun away came slowly back into focus, and he came back with it, to the reality of the captain's pantry, and Esmeralda in his arms, kissing his jaw softly and murmuring "Jack, Jack…*mi corazón*…"

There was so little air left in the cramped space that he wanted to open the door, but he was conscious of his own dishevelment—and hers. Jack began setting himself to rights. Esmeralda was tidying herself too, he could tell by the rustling of satin.

When her rustling sounds ceased, Jack reached behind him and opened the door to the pantry. Comparatively cool air flooded in, feeling wonderful against his sweaty face and neck.

Stepping out of the pantry, he waited a moment to let his eyes adjust to the greater level of light coming in from the windows. The cabin was now fully dark, but Jack had served as Teague's cabin boy for years, before he was considered old enough to do a man's work aboard ship. He knew where things were. Quickly he located the lantern, and the flint and steel. When the flame caught, he closed the little door, then placed it on the deck, where its illumination was mostly blocked by the Captain's pantry door. He couldn't afford to have light shining through the big cabin windows; the duty watch might see it, and come to investigate.

Standing back-to-back, Jack and Esmeralda finished adjusting their clothing. He tucked his shirt back into his britches, then he stepped back into the pantry to find and pull on his abandoned waistcoat. He heard more rustling, and knew Esmeralda must be tugging the bodice of her

dress back into place, then shaking out her petticoats, followed by her skirt, so it lay smoothly atop them. When he finally turned to look at her, she was running her hands through her hair, which had come loose; it flowed over her shoulders and down her back.

Realizing the significance of her unbound hair, Jack went back into the pantry, knelt down, and carefully retrieved all of her hairpins. She didn't attempt to put her hair back up—Teague didn't even have a mirror hung in his cabin, but, working by feel, she pinned it back from her face, leaving it loose down her back.

Jack walked over to the sleeping dog, then bent over and picked up the ring of keys, saying a silent "thank you" to the gods of the sea that Teague hadn't taken them with him. He tucked them down inside the front of his britches, pulling the tails of his long shirt to wrap around them, so the fabric would muffle any betraying jingle of metal. After buttoning his waistcoat, he was satisfied that nothing showed.

Then he blew out the lantern, put everything back in place, and shut the pantry doors. Finally, he unlocked the door, leaving the cabin as he'd found it. After relocking the door, Jack placed the key back in its hiding place.

Together, but not speaking or touching, they made their way to the ladder and climbed back up to the weather deck. Jack took Esmeralda's hand as he reached the top. Rufus was still on watch, and the pirate gave them a knowing glance, but tipped his hat and bade them a polite good night.

They walked down the gangplank in silence, and in silence continued along the docks toward *Venganza*. As they walked, Jack searched for something to say, but his gift of loquacity seemed to have deserted him. Glancing sideways at her profile as she picked her way along the docks, Jack wondered what she might expect from him now. He still

couldn’t believe what had just happened—and the intensity of it frankly scared him.

The walk back to *Venganza* seemed endless.

When they reached the gangplank, he stopped, and she turned to face him. Esmeralda finally raised her eyes to meet his, but she didn’t break the silence. Jack had been hoping she would, willing her to speak, so he’d have some idea of what to say, how to act.

Reaching out, he took her other hand, so he was holding both of them. He knew crewmen and her grandfather might be watching them, so he didn’t dare offer her so much as a kiss on the cheek.

It felt so strange, to be tongue-tied like this. Usually he was excellent at conjuring up seemingly sincere phrases, not to mention extravagant flattery. He’d told Melinda that he loved her any number of times, because she seemed to like hearing it, even though she undoubtedly knew better. Yet here he was, lucky Jack Sparrow, facing the first woman he’d ever really cared about—and there were no words, no words at all.

She watched him, her expression uneasy. “What will you do now, Jack?” she said, finally, keeping her voice low. “What are you planning?”

Jack sighed, relieved. His feelings were a muddle, and he didn’t feel capable of sorting them out, much less sharing them. He managed a faint smile and squeezed Esmeralda’s hands. “Not going to say, love. You can’t tell what you don’t know, and it’s better that way.”

“You’ll…you’ll be careful, won’t you, Jack?” He could feel the tension in her. Her voice was low, as though she had to force words past a tightness in her throat.

Jack summoned his best happy-go-lucky grin. “It’s what I’m best at, darlin’. Don’t worry about me for a moment.”

Esmeralda gave him a quick, impatient glance, a look that clearly told him he was an idiot for even suggesting that she wouldn’t worry.

Jack shrugged slightly, with a “what can I say?” expression, and gave her hands a final squeeze. “Must run. See you tomorrow, love.”

Then he let her go. Turning, he strode away, moving so fast he was nearly running, the boards of the dock echoing his footsteps.

The ramshackle structure of piled-up ships that made up Shipwreck City was built on an island in the middle of the caldera. The dungeons of the pirate’s bastion were located beneath the city, carved out of solid rock by generations of pirates. They were extensive, but, at the moment, overcrowded. The crew complements of two pirate vessels totaled nearly a hundred and fifty men. Jack found the obscure entrance, then wended his way down a stone flight of timeworn steps, lit only by a smoky torch. When he reached the bottom, he saw there were several pirate guards lounging around, but only one sat behind a table.

Roger Mortensen, tongue tip caught between his teeth as he concentrated, was laboriously making entries in some kind of logbook. As Jack stood in the shadows, silently watching, the head jailer ostentatiously dropped his quill. When he bent over to retrieve it, he pulled out a flask and refreshed himself from it, using the tabletop to mask his actions.

This is my moment, Jack thought. Summoning his most fey smile, he waltzed up to Mortensen, saying in dulcet tones, “Hallo, Roger. A little parrot told me you were looking for me.”

Mortensen choked, but managed to swallow, and swiftly concealed the flask before he straightened up. “Where’ve you been, Jacky? We searched everywhere!”

Jack smiled slyly. “Obviously, you didn’t look *everywhere*, Roger. If you had, you would have found me. Quid pro quo, ipso facto, rigor mortis, and carpe diem, as they say. So…what’s all this to-do about, anyhow?”

Mortensen frowned as he attempted to follow Jack's discourse. After a moment, he abandoned the effort. "Jacky, de Rapièr asked to see you.

Final request, and all that. Cap'n Teague approved it. You ready to talk to him?"

Jack shrugged unconcernedly. "If I must, I suppose. The first cellblock I presume? The solitary cell?" He made as if to head down the leftmost corridor, the one leading to the closest cellblock.

"No, he's in the second cellblock, and not so fast," Mortensen said, stepping quickly to bar his way. "I have to accompany you. Captain Teague's orders."

Jack drew himself up, suitably affronted by this blatant lack of trust. "*Really*, Roger! Recall that I've been roaming this benighted oubliette of yours since I was a mere sprat. I'm hardly likely to get *lost!* "

Mortensen flushed. "Orders is orders," he maintained. "Cap'n Teague said I have to go with you, and stay there while you talk to de Rapièr." His reddened eyes took on a malicious gleam. "Cap'n Teague warned me you might do somethin' *stupid*, Jacky boy."

Jack rolled his eyes and pouted. "I don't believe this! I agree to go talk to Christophe, who is, without a doubt, among the most annoying pimples on the backside of Mother Earth, out of the goodness of me kindly heart, seeing as he's fated to swing tomorrow at sunrise, only to have you inform me that I can't even talk to him in private?"

"Don't blame me, Jacky," Mortensen said. "Take that up with Cap'n Teague—if you got the stones, mate." He guffawed at his own wit. "Now stand still while I search you."

Jack folded his arms across his chest with an air of exaggerated patience. "First I can't talk to Christophe privately, then I have to stand here and let you *paw* me, Roger? All on the orders of Captain Aren't We So Important Keeper of the Bloody Be-Damned *Code*, Teague? I think not!

I’m going back to Miss Fanny’s. Sophie promised me a threesome with a succulent raven-haired sea-nymph.” He turned away with a flounce.

The beefy Mortensen grabbed his arm and jerked him to a halt. “Oh no you don’t, you insolent little git. I spent half the evening lookin’ for your sorry arse, and I’m not lettin’ you out of my sight until you’ve had your sodding visit with de Rapièr, damn his Frenchy Code-breaker soul.”

Jack could smell the rum on Mortensen’s breath, and the big man was just a trifle unsteady on his feet. *You’d better sober up before Teague gets back, Roger*, he thought. *Or you’re likely to wind up next to Borya tomorrow at dawn….*

Having never intended to leave, Jack allowed Mortensen to halt his retreat, then stood there, lower lip thrust out. “Oh, very well,” he said sullenly, raising his hands in the air. “Search away if you must. I’m unarmed. But my fa—Captain Teague will hear of this, you’d best believe it.”

“Sure he will, Jacky boy,” Mortensen said, with a nasty sneer.

Mortensen tried to be thorough; Jack had to give him that. First he made Jack remove his boots. Roger peered down each boot, then shook them vigorously to make sure there was nothing concealed inside. Then he began running his hands over Jack, down his sides, beneath his arms, down his legs. Finally, he patted Jack’s chest and back, then his midsection, working his way south, clearly uncomfortable with what he was doing. Jack stood passively, until Mortensen’s hands slid along his ribs, then he winced theatrically and giggled. “Roger, stop that! I’m ticklish!”

“Shut up, Jacky,” Mortensen growled.

As the jailer’s hands brushed the waistband of Jack’s britches, then started downward, toward his crotch, Jack snickered loudly, then caroled, “What is this, Roger? Trying to discover whether I’m a eunuch? Ask Miss Sophie, she’ll vouch for me.” He did a bump and grind, then winked and leered at the guard. “Roger, old chum, unless you want to

cause me embarrassment—and yourself a lifelong case of envy—by demanding that I actually produce the goods for your delectation…er…inspection, I'd suggest you desist." He batted his eyes at Teague's lieutenant.

Mortensen stepped back. His weather-beaten countenance flushed a dull red. "You're clean," he snapped, indicating the corridor leading off to the right. "Come with me."

Jack smiled and did as ordered.

Mortensen led him up a long cellblock. The dungeon seemed eerily silent. Each cell contained multiple prisoners, except for the last one, which was small by comparison. Jack looked in, to see Christophe alone, sitting in the corner, knees drawn up to his chest, his head drooping listlessly. The enclosure was featureless, save for a foul-smelling hole in the opposite corner. Hearing footsteps, the Frenchman looked up, then his eyes widened.

"Jacques!" he exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "*Mon Dieu*, I thought you'd never come!"

Without answering, Jack abruptly turned to confront Mortensen, who was looming behind him, scarcely a handbreadth away. "I don't care if you're present, Roger, but *must* you breathe down the back of me neck?" He rolled his eyes. "Or are you trying to work up the courage to grab me backside and give it a squeeze?" He'd spoken loudly, and his voice carried to all Christophe's crewmen. The cell-bound pirates laughed, whistled, and jeered obscene suggestions at Mortensen.

Pretending he couldn't hear them, and that it was his own idea, Mortensen stepped back a few paces.

Jack turned back to Christophe. "What the bloody hell is going on, mate?" he demanded, keeping his voice down. "They told me Borya gave you up as a rogue pirate."

Christophe's dark eyes met Jack's unflinchingly. "Jacques, *mon ami*. Have I ever lied to you?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Jack said, cautiously.

“Then believe me now, of all times we have spoken truth between us. Jacques, I am innocent! Borya has long had hatred for me. I caught him cheating at cards once, in Tortuga, and I called him out. I challenged him to a duel in front of the entire tavern. But the Russian is, at heart, a coward. He did not have the…” Christophe groped for a word, “the spleen, the stomach, the internal organs…” He broke off, grimacing.

“The guts?” Jack suggested.

“Exactly! The guts to face me in a duel. He could do nothing but turn and walk away. Everyone in The Faithful Bride was laughing at him, calling him coward to his face. He has hated me ever since. So today, when he realized he was going to die, he seized his chance to gain his revenge on me, to make his own passing a bit more bearable by taking me, his enemy, with him. Jack, I swear to you, as *le bon Dieu* is my witness”—he crossed himself—“in the name of the Holy Virgin and all the saints, *I am innocent*.”

“They say you murdered Old One Tooth Tommy, Christophe,” Jack said. “The night he died, you were with me and Esmeralda for the first part of the evening. What did you do after we escorted her back to *Venganza*?”

“I heard that I am also convicted of killing that pitiful old crazy man,” Christophe said, twirling his fingers beside his temple. “But Jack, I did not. After we parted from Esmeralda, I rowed back to *La Vipère*, and I went to bed.” He paused. “Alone.”

“Damn,” Jack said. “Did anyone see you rowing back?”

“Only my crew.”

“That tears it, then,” Jack muttered. “I’d hoped there was someone that could vouch for your whereabouts after you left *Venganza*. Someone other than your crewmen.”

“I am sorry, but no. There is not.” Christophe’s shoulders slumped. He clutched the iron bars, hanging his head in despair. He was breathing hard, visibly struggling to control himself. Jack watched him, seeing that his friend’s

handsome features were smudged and sweaty; stubble and bruises darkened the formerly clean line of his jaw. He must have fought back against his captors, because his elegant clothes were torn and filthy.

When the French pirate finally raised his head, Jack was shocked to see that his dark eyes were filled with tears. “Jacques, tomorrow at dawn they are going to hang me, and all my men, who are innocent, too. We are pirates, yes, but you are a pirate, too! We have not broken the Code! It is Captain Borya’s malice, his final revenge on an enemy that has brought us to this pass. Jacques, you are my best friend in all the world…please. Help me.”

Jack bit his lip, and did not reply.

Christophe drew a deep, shaky breath. “Please. Please, Jacques…I am begging you.”

Jack looked into his friend’s eyes for a long moment, then he took a deep breath. “Sorry, Christophe,” he said, distinctly. “I wish I could help you, but Teague’s given the order for execution and there’s no getting around it. Esmeralda says she’ll pray for you.”

“Jacques!” Christophe clutched the bars spasmodically. “*Please*!”

“I’ll be with you in spirit, mate, tomorrow morning,” Jack said, then slowly, deliberately, he winked.

Christophe’s eyes widened slightly.

“Don’t worry about how long it will take, mate,” Jack continued. “Keep in mind that *it will only take a few minutes, then it will be over, Christophe, and you’ll be free*.” He accented the words as much as he dared, which wasn’t much, but he knew Christophe was quick.

“You’ll be free of the bonds of this earth, mate,” he added. “Concentrate on that, not on what comes before. *Savvy*?” He winked again.

A spark leaped in Christophe’s dark eyes, and he quickly bowed his head and crossed himself again. “I understand,

Jacques," he said, quietly. "You are a good friend, to come tonight and offer me spiritual comfort."

Jack waved a hand deprecatingly. "Just wish I could do more, mate."

Christophe nodded, then, head hanging, he waved sadly at Jack, before lying down on the straw in his cell and turning his back to the outside world.

Jack turned and headed out of the cellblock, with Mortensen following behind. When they reached the area outside the guard post, Jack stopped and turned to the jailer. "Well, thanks for taking me in there," he said, in a low voice, not looking up. "Won't pretend it was easy. But maybe I was able to give Christophe some comfort."

Mortensen nodded, but did not speak. He remained at the end of the passageway, which Jack had figured he'd do, because it was deserted, and he'd be able to grab another nip from his flask unobserved—which was precisely what occurred. Jack watched out of the corner of his eye as he walked through the guard chamber, then out into the entrance passageway, the one leading to the stairs.

When he reached them, he didn't start climbing, however. A quick glance over his shoulder assured him that no guards were in sight. Jack turned to his left, stepping past the stone stairway, walked a few steps, then turned right. Pressing his back against the stone in the small area behind the dungeon steps, he waited for a moment to be certain he hadn't been followed.

Jack walked along the old passageway behind the stairs, careful to move quietly. The passageway wasn't long; it dead-ended in a rock-fall about fifty feet from the stairs. Jack moved to the far left of the rock-fall, squatted down, and then began cautiously moving rocks, careful to make as little sound as possible.

He shifted perhaps twenty rocks the size of a medium-sized cannonball, then paused when he saw a glimpse of

brown amid the gray of the rocks, to breathe a sigh of relief. *Good, it's still there. Now if the passage is still clear....*

Shifting more rocks brought his secret entrance into view. It was a portion of an old hatch that he'd wedged in there, to block the hole he'd discovered in the otherwise collapsed passageway. He'd found it years ago, when he was perhaps twelve or thirteen, during one of his many forays exploring the old dungeons.

Jack gazed dubiously at the revealed passageway. He'd worked at shoring it up, back when he'd first discovered it. He just hoped the supports were still holding. Taking off his hat, coat, and waistcoat, he placed them out of sight behind the rocks, then ducked down and wriggled forward on his belly.

Jack scuttled forward, but a passage that had been easy when he was twelve was painful now; he'd grown more than he'd realized in the intervening years. Twice he stuck fast, and the second time when he finally managed to wriggle forward by pushing hard with his toes and pulling with his hands, he heard the shoulder of his shirt rip. He cursed mentally, not daring to open his mouth, because of the dampness, as well as the stuff filtering down from the rocks that brushed the top of his head. Still, he'd gone too far now to stop; Jack kept moving.

Finally he pulled himself through into empty darkness. This old section of the dungeons was long-forgotten by everyone except him.

Cautiously, feeling above his head for the roof of the passageway, he stood up, then fumbled along the right wall until his fingers encountered a rusted old bracket. He'd left a bundle of candles here, years ago.

Taking out his flint and steel, he managed to get the candle lit.

The passageway was unchanged from the last time he'd come here. Jack started forward, mentally reviewing the way to get into the still-used cellblocks. Five minutes later, his

flickering candle revealed an ancient door, its planks as hard as iron. Taking out Teague's ring of keys, he located the correct key.

Before unlocking the door, he stood on tiptoe and dripped candle wax onto the top hinge, then the bottom one. Then, praying the old lock wouldn't make too much noise, he inserted the key and turned it very, very slowly.

It creaked, but not too loudly. Pushing the door open, Jack blew out the candle, placed it a foot from the door inside the passageway, then closed the door behind him and relocked it. He stood for a moment, listening, but couldn't hear anything but the sounds made by the unhappy denizens of the cells. Before him, the passageway ran for about twenty feet, then split.

Leftmost passageway…first cellblock. Rightmost… second cellblock.

Jack headed right. Moments later he was standing before Christophe's cell, having entered the cellblock from the opposite side of the dungeon from the guard post.

Christophe was on his feet, waiting for him. "Jacques!" he whispered. "*Mon Dieu*, it's been forever, where have you *been*?" Taking in Jack's disheveled condition, he added, "What have you been *doing*?"

"Shhhh!" Jack cautioned. Turning to face the rest of the cellblock, the faces pressed against the bars, he held up the keys and put a finger to his lips, then pointed to himself. The level of chatter ceased. Then, as *La Vipère*'s crew caught his meaning, the background chatter picked up again.

"We have to hurry," Jack breathed to Christophe. "The guards come through every twenty minutes or so to make sure nothing's amiss."

Finding the right key, he quickly unlocked Christophe's cell. "Be quiet, Christophe," he cautioned. "Borya's men aren't far away. They're in the first cellblock. If he gets wind of what's going on, he'll surely betray you." Stepping back, he eased the door open.

The next few minutes were busy. Jack handed Christophe the ring of keys, and together they moved quietly down the cellblock. As he unlocked each cell, Christophe spoke in a hushed whisper, cautioning his men to remain in the cell with the door shut until he gave the signal.

As they neared the end of the long row of cells, Christophe seemed to remember something that had escaped him. Placing a hand on Jack's arm, he fixed his rescuer with a penetrating stare. "You *will* be going with us, *mon ami, non*?"

Jack shook his head. "No. Once all your men's cells are unlocked, I'm taking those keys and scuttling out of here as fast as a crab on a white sand beach, Christophe. I have to put them back in Teague's cabin before he misses them. Give me about ten minutes to get out of the dungeons before you make your break, understand? I have to go back the way I came, so they won't see me." He glanced over his shoulder. "With any luck, Teague decided to sit in on Villanueva's Hazard game."

Christophe nodded. "I see, *mon ami*. Very well. It is, of course, your choice."

Jack followed behind Christophe as the French pirate unlocked the remaining cells, all the while keeping a nervous lookout. He felt horribly exposed. Finally, Christophe turned the key in a lock, and announced, triumphantly, "There we have it, Jacques. The last of my crew."

Jack let out a sigh of relief. "That's great, Christophe." He held out his hand for the ring of keys. "You'd best get back in your cell. One of the guards will be along any moment. Remember, I need about ten minutes to haul my arse out of this bloody dungeon, then you make your break for it." He smiled. "I hope we run into each other somewhere. We can have a drink and have a good laugh over all of this, eh?"

Christophe smiled. It was a sly, cunning, expression. Jack found it unsettling, even disturbing….It was almost as though he were looking at a stranger, one wearing Christophe's face and clothes. "Oh, yes, Jacques. A good laugh, that is most apropos."

Turning, he walked away from Jack and his outstretched hand, carrying the ring of keys, and heading for the first cellblock. Before de Rapièr turned the corner, he carelessly waved his free hand. Jack stood there gaping as the Frenchman vanished. "Christophe! What the bloody—"

He barely registered the sound of the cell door at his back creaking open, he was so stunned to realize that Christophe was, in fact, betraying him. *How can he do this to me?* Jack thought, outraged. *I have to warn Teague's—*

As Jack drew breath to yell, hard hands seized him and a filthy palm clamped down over his mouth.

All around him Christophe's crew, many of them grinning and waving cheerfully at him, were opening their cells and silently filing out. The pirates holding Jack shoved him forward, and they all headed into the next cellblock.

The first sight that greeted Jack's eyes when they got there was Borya, stepping out of his cell and embracing de Rapièr. "*Spasibo!* Thank you, my brother," he said to Christophe. As he saw Jack, he gave him a mocking salute. "Now let us free the rest of my crew."

Jack watched the two rogues as they moved together, talking in whispers, while Christophe busily unlocked the cells containing *Koldunya*'s crew. He felt as though he'd been gut-punched by a battering ram; he couldn't seem to catch his breath, and that was only partly because of the brutal hand clamped over his mouth. His mind raced frantically in circles. Should he fight? Try to break free so he could yell and raise the alarm? His eyes flicked to the mob of silent, grinning cutthroats, and he knew that any motion on his part, and he'd be dead within seconds.

All of the cells were now open. Borya cautioned for quiet, then spoke softly, but clearly. “Remember our plan… when we give the signal, we all go together, running quietly until we see the guards. Then we make plenty noise, *da*?” He grinned.

“Stick to the plan,” Christophe added. “Once we deal with the guards, we storm the armory. We need weapons to fight our way out of Shipwreck City. When we reach the docks we will commandeer every small boat we can, and row for our ships. Understand?”

Jack saw the huge mob of rogues nodding, heard the commands being repeated in soft whispers.

When silence fell, the tension was so thick Jack felt as though it had sucked all the fetid air from the dungeon.

Christophe and Borya stepped slightly apart, clasped their hands together, then suddenly, raised them high.

Quiet chaos erupted.

One moment they were all standing there, silent, then they were running, still in eerie silence except for the sounds of their feet. Jack’s captors shoved him forward, kept him locked in an iron grip. He tried to throw himself to the side, but the men holding him were so strong they nearly picked him up to keep him moving. Hearing the pounding of the feet behind him, he began to run in earnest, realizing that if he threw himself down, he’d be trampled by the men behind him.

Moments later he saw the guard post, heard the guards yelling, and only then did the rogues break their silence. Screams and battle cries filled the air, deafening in the echoing dungeon.

The next few minutes were a blur, as the rogues stormed the guard post. A good dozen of the cutthroats went down before the shots and sword thrusts of the guards, but there were simply too many of them. The guards stood their ground, brave men obeying orders to the last. As the last defender fell, his throat a red ruin, Jack felt

the hands holding him loosen, and suddenly he was free. But now there was nowhere to go. He was as trapped as if they'd locked him in a cell, trapped by dozens upon dozens of screaming rogue pirates.

Now they were emptying the armory.

Jack kept trying to make himself small, so he could slide free of the mob and hide, or run. If he could just make it into the secret passage….But it was impossible in the melee. Someone thrust a cutlass into his hand. He almost threw it down, but, at the last moment, he hung on to it. Maybe when they got outside, he could cut his way free, and bolt.

Almost immediately, he realized that was a forlorn hope. The moment they reached the top of the stairs and burst out into the night, half of Shipwreck City would know that Jack Sparrow had betrayed his heritage, not to mention breaking the Code. If he managed to elude the rogues, Teague and his men would catch him, and he would swing from a yardarm. They probably wouldn't even wait for dawn.

The screaming mob was running, and Jack perforce had to run with them, or risk being pounded into pulp by booted feet should he fall. There were stairs beneath his boots, but they didn't slow the rogues in the least. They raced as fast as sharks converging on a sinking vessel.

Jack couldn't keep track of his surroundings. Everything seemed to be light and shadow, torches flickering in sconces on stone walls; then, suddenly, he burst out into fresh air, and there was wood beneath his feet, planks instead of stone, stars instead of a ceiling.

The rabble of rogues headed for the docks. The din they made was earsplitting. Stumbling, swearing, Jack tried to break free of the howling throng, but every time he thought he'd managed to make progress, harsh hands seized him, or booted feet kicked him, propelling him forward, thrusting him onward.

They were all slowing now, having reached the docks, and the available small boats. Shrieking rogues raced up

ship gangplanks, cutting down or shooting anyone that resisted, then cutting the vessel's boats free, letting them splash down into the cove.

Directly ahead of the group Jack was perforce part of, a large group of pirates approached, heavily armed, carrying torches. Captain Teague was in the lead. The rogue beside Jack raised his musket, taking a bead on the Keeper of the Code. With a choked cry of protest, and a savage swing of his cutlass, Jack knocked the barrel of the musket aside. The shot went wide.

The pirate holding the musket turned toward Jack, rage darkening his features. Jack prepared to square off with him before he could reload, but just as he fell into guard position, something large and unyielding struck him hard behind his right ear.

Jack's eyes rolled back in his head, and he went down like a scuttled vessel, down, down…into darkness.

Captain Jack Sparrow blinked, feeling the fresh breeze marking the end of the gale flow through the window of the *Wicked Wench*. How long had he been standing here, lost in memory?

It was still dark. No grayness marked the eastern horizon. Jack went back to his bunk and crawled in. He lay on his back, linking his hands behind his head, cautiously stretching sore muscles, and felt himself relax. It felt good. He was tired; he needed sleep. But his eyes remained open in the darkness.

I've been doing that a lot, this past year, he thought. *Remembering Shipwreck Cove and how I became an outcast, a Code-breaker, an exile, a condemned man who can never, ever go back. Because if Teague ever catches up with me, he'll kill me.*

Jack frowned in the darkness at the thought of Teague's vengeance. He'd seen the Keeper shoot Code-breakers in

the head with no more emotion than he'd show when cracking a louse, or crushing a roach. To Teague, the Code was not only the Law, it was *everything*. To have someone with whom he had a personal connection—no matter how strained—turn traitor and Code-breaker must have been doubly infuriating.

But it had been five years since those days in Shipwreck Cove, and Christophe's betrayal. Jack's eyes narrowed as he thought of the rogue pirate. The morning he'd awakened aboard *La Vipère* with a lump behind his ear the size of a hen's egg, and sickly realized he was leagues from Shipwreck Island and Esmeralda, had been a very bad awakening indeed. One he preferred not to remember.

Five years is a long time, especially for a pirate. "A short life but a merry one," and all that rot. I'm a respectable merchant sailor now, a captain. I doubt many from Shipwreck Cove would even recognize me today.

He smiled, remembering that night with Esmeralda aboard *Venganza*, and how she had nearly stripped him naked—well, actually, she *had* done that, but this was before they'd wound up in her big bed—and how she'd gone on about how he didn't look like "her Jack" anymore. She was absolutely right. Jack Sparrow *didn't* look like a pirate anymore, and that was intentional. If he stayed away from certain haunts in Port Royal, or any one of a number of pirate hangouts, and gave Tortuga a wide berth, the chances that anyone would recognize him and attempt to drag him back to Shipwreck Cove to face the Keeper of the Code were slim to none.

*So **why** are all these bloody memories plaguing me, then? It isn't like me to moon around, summoning up the past.* Jack scowled. *Tia Dalma would probably say it was "destiny" coming full circle, or something of that sort. What's that stuff the Hindoos go on about? Karma, that's it.*

He snorted. Karma, destiny…despite his respect for the Obeah woman, he didn't think he believed in either. He

believed in Jack Sparrow, *Captain* Jack Sparrow, thank-you-very-much, and that was the sum total of it, make no mistake.

Jack rolled over, and immediately fell asleep.

For the next few days, Jack and his crew were busy dealing with problems caused by the gale. The *Wicked Wench* had come through relatively unscathed—they'd been lucky. Still, sails had to be mended, the decks fouled with spew and spray scrubbed, and all of the lines checked to make sure they hadn't been frayed or weakened by the storm. Jack and his officers were busy each day, inspecting the vessel from bow to stern.

As though exhausted following such a fracas, the winds were gentle, bringing fresher, cooler air. The *Wench* rounded the bulge of Africa and headed north, making good time, despite all the tacking back and forth.

Jack had daily reports from Chamba about his passengers. Both of them, as predicted, had been very sick during the storm, but within a few days, Tarek began appearing on deck to take the air. The giant African had been fitted with mismatched clothes from the slop chest, so he no longer wore clothing that marked him as a former slave. Jack spoke to him a time or two, via Chamba. Tarek thanked the captain for his part in rescuing him from the Dalton farm, and reported that Ayisha was still quite ill, unable to keep anything down.

Chamba appeared one morning to ask permission to have the cook brew up some special folk remedies for her, in hopes they'd prove to be something the Zerzuran woman could stomach. Concerned, Jack gave him all possible assistance, even trotting belowdecks with some English tea and actual sugar from his captain's pantry, in the hopes it would help. "Oh, and tell cook to make some broth, or gruel,

something like that," he suggested, handing them to the lad. "Isn't that what they give sick people?"

Chamba stared at him. "Don't you know?"

Jack shook his head. "Actually, I don't."

"You never been sick, Cap'n?" The youth seemed incredulous.

Jack ruminated for a moment. "Certainly not seasick," he said, finally. "And I can't remember being any other kind of sick, either." He paused, thinking. "Do hangovers count? I suppose not; they're self-inflicted."

Seeing that Chamba was hanging on his every word, obviously fascinated, Jack ventured, "Had a hogshead roll over me legs once. It was a wonder I didn't break them. Hobbled around for a week before they stopped hurting. Been wounded, too."

Chamba's eyes widened. "Wounded? How?"

Jack grimaced. "Whacked on the head more than once. Shot. Some sword cuts, but I'd take them any time over being shot. I was lucky the ball went clean through."

Chamba's eyes were now the size of saucers. "Neptune's nightgown, Cap'n, you led an exciting life! Was you attacked by *pirates*?"

Jack thought fast and worded his response carefully. "Pirate attacks did figure into it, yes," he said, careful not to be specific as to which side of the engagement he'd been on. He looked down at Chamba. "Are you still here? Run along and tend to your passengers, lad, or I'll put you to work scrubbing the decks."

"Aye, Cap'n!"

Two days later, Ayisha emerged from her exile below, accompanied solicitously by Tarek. She was obviously weak and shaky, and, as much as Jack wanted to talk to her, he merely smiled and nodded from a distance.

He did notice that she made at least one trip to the railing to heave once again, and quickly found something to do elsewhere. Sick people gave him the collywobbles.

For the next two days, Jack was conscious of her up on deck, shakily moving about, clutching Tarek's or Chamba's arm, her gray shawl covering her head against the brilliant African sun. Her visits to the railing seemed to be lessening. Good; she was getting over her seasickness. He'd be able to talk to her about their course soon. They were still at least a week's sail away from the southernmost of the Cape Verdes, so they had time.

Two days later, he saw her on deck, alone. She was walking slowly about, clutching that ever-present shawl, staring off to the north. Feeling the tug of home, perhaps?

Jack ambled over to her. "G'morning, Miss Ayisha," he said, tipping his tricorne.

She gave him a cool glance, but replied in English. "Good morning, Captain Sparrow."

"Good to see you feeling better," Jack observed. "They tell me being seasick is dreadful. I'm sorry you were so badly affected."

She made a brushing-away motion with her hand. "I'd just as soon not think about that, thank you."

"Fine by me," Jack agreed. "I'd like to talk to you about our course. In a few days, we'll be reaching the area of the southernmost Cape Verdes. Are you feeling any of the 'pull' toward home you mentioned?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Hmmmm…too bad," Jack said. "Well, perhaps when we're north of them, it will set in."

"We won't be going north," she stated, calmly. "Our course lies west. To the New World."

Jack gaped at her. It took him a moment to find his voice, and when he did, he could only sputter, "Wh—wh—*what*?"

"My English is quite good, Captain Sparrow. I'm sure you understood me. We go west."

"Why the devil would we head *west*?"

"You have cargo bound for Antigua, do you not?"

“Bugger that!” Jack was so incensed by her serene high-handedness that he felt himself reddening. This woman was as infuriating as she was ugly. “You know we had an agreement! If I helped you—and bloody Tarek—to escape, you’d take me to Zerzura.”

“I am not breaking our agreement,” she said. She looked at him. A spasm of something crossed her face as the *Wench* rolled with a large swell. “I am just postponing it. Until I find my brother. He was taken to the New World aboard a slave ship, and sold there.”

“No,” Jack said. “Madam…” He controlled himself with an effort, then cleared his throat and gentled his voice. “Miss Ayisha…I am very sorry to have to tell you this, but your brother is likely dead. A third—sometimes more—of the black gold cargoes don’t survive the voyage west. And countless slaves perish in the New World. Many owners feed them rations a dog wouldn’t touch, and they work them to death.”

“My brother,” she said firmly, clutching her shawl, “is *alive*. I know this.”

“No, you don’t. Besides, the New World is a big place. Finding one slave in all of it would be worse than finding a needle in a haystack. Much worse.”

“He’s alive, and I will find him,” she said. Another spasm crossed her face as the *Wench* rolled again. Clapping a hand over her mouth, she bolted for the railing.

Jack stood back and looked away as she heaved, grateful that she had the courtesy not to foul his nice, freshly scrubbed deck.

But after a minute or two, when she was reduced to dry retching, spasms so intense that she was clinging weakly with both hands to the railing, her body bent so far over that it seemed she was in real danger of going overboard, Jack strode over to her.

“Here now,” he said, gently. “We can’t have you going over the side, love. Come on, I’ll help you below.”

She shook her head no, too weak to speak, clinging to the rail. Spitting a final time into the blue Atlantic, she wiped her mouth on her old shawl and tried to stand up. Her knees buckled.

Jack took matters into his own hands, grabbing her, hoisting her over his shoulder, then heading for the ladder. Ayisha was too weak to struggle, though she did mumble a protest. Jack ignored her. He was surprised to find that she was considerably lighter than she appeared, but he supposed anyone would be, after a week of not keeping much down.

He headed down the ladder, reached the main deck, then carried her through the looped-back flap of canvas that constituted the “door” to her “cabin.” Tarek was not there. Jack frowned. He’d get her back in her bunk, then send Chamba or the big man below to tend to her.

Moving slowly, Jack maneuvered his way inside, careful not trip over the unused cannon mountings. The little cabin was gloomy, still smelling faintly of sickness, so, on his way, he stopped to open the gun port, letting sunlight and fresh air flood in. *Ah, that’s better*, he thought.

Bending over, he lowered Ayisha onto her mattress. She was as limp as a tangle of seaweed. Her skirts were rucked up, so he carefully tugged them down, averting his eyes as he did so. He wasn’t even tempted to peek. No doubt her legs were as ugly as the rest of her. “There, that’s better, isn’t it?” he said, still resolutely not looking. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll just go fetch Tarek or Chamba to come below and, er, minister to you, eh?”

Ayisha didn’t respond, whether from anger at his high-handed method of transport, or sickness, Jack didn’t know—or care.

The captain stood up. “Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to keep your shawl,” he said, pulling it off his shoulder, trying to sound cheerful and nurselike. “Wouldn’t flatter me at all, I fear. Here, let me spread it—”

Jack broke off, the gray shawl in his hands, staring incredulously down at the woman in the bunk.

As she saw his eyes widen, Ayisha made an inarticulate sound of protest, then she covered her face with her hands. Jack looked at her, then looked at the shawl. Rolling it into a ball, he tossed it across the cabin. “Ah,” he said. “Much becomes clear. Magic. A bloody powerful illusion, that. Even Tia Dalma might be impressed.”

Gently, he bent over, and pulled her hands away from her face. “By Neptune’s trident,” he breathed. “You are one *pretty* girl.” Gently, he pushed a coil of black hair off her forehead. “Lovely, as a matter of fact.”

“Captain Sparrow,” she said, sounding, for the first time since he’d met her, frightened to the point of panic, “please, I beg of you. Don’t tell.”

Ayisha struggled to sit up. It was plain she didn’t want help, so he didn’t offer any. Sitting up, she brushed her hair back from her face, then sat cross-legged on her crackling straw tick, modestly pulling her skirts down, covering even her feet.

Jack, in his turn, sat down cross-legged, facing her. He couldn’t stop looking. Lovely features. A high-bridged, proud nose, full, sensuous lips, large, long-lashed eyes, beautifully carved cheekbones, and a delicate but strong chin. Her hair was black, the length and color of a raven’s wing; it curled against those sculpted cheekbones. Her skin color was a rich, warm-toned brown with a hint of red. *Cinnamon*, Jack thought. He’d hauled cargoes of it, had inhaled the heady scent of it. They used it in Hindoo curries, and it was delicious.

He didn’t want to stare at the rest of her, but even a quick glance as she’d sat up had assured him that the rest of her was a good match for that face. A slender body, small, elegant breasts. Was the beautiful Ayisha the same height as the ugly Ayisha? He had no idea.

“Please,” she repeated. “Promise you won’t tell anyone.”

Jack came back to the moment with a start. “Oh. I’m sorry. Fear not, love. I won’t tell. Mum’s the word. Besides,” he smiled at her, his most charming smile. “I’d be mad to tell on you. Much better to keep such beauty all to meself.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t start that kind of talk, Captain Sparrow. Tarek, my eunuch bodyguard, is *very* protective. And *I* cast that spell with the shawl. If you tried anything, I assure you, you would regret it.”

Jack’s eyes widened. “A real *eunuch*? He doesn’t look it, big strong-looking chap like that. Good heavens! Never thought I’d actually encounter one.” He shuddered slightly, putting his hands protectively in his lap. “Did *you* do that to him?”

For the first time that day, she smiled. It wasn’t a particularly nice smile, and he could tell she had noted his defensive posture. “No. It was his choice to become one.”

It was on the tip of Jack’s tongue to ask why any man would choose to do that voluntarily, but he kept his mouth shut.

Silence fell between them. Jack regarded Ayisha, considering all the things about her that simply didn’t add up—and, he suddenly realized, there were a *lot* of them. “There’s something I’d like to know,” he said, finally.

“What is it, Captain?”

“How does a ‘sewing woman’ wind up having a bodyguard?”

The Zerzuran woman hesitated for a moment, then replied, smoothly, “I fear I misspoke, Captain. Tarek was part of the Royal Guard. It was his duty to protect both the princess and her household. After she was gone, he continued to do his duty toward the members of her household…and I am the only one left. So he will protect me, I know this.”

Jack cocked his head at her. “Very well done,” he said. “Almost glib. But the ‘bodyguard’ thing isn’t the only problem. The way you speak, and carry yourself…it’s very posh. Cutler Beckett could have you over to tea and not worry about you disgracing him. And for someone who was a slave only days ago, you’re very accustomed to giving orders. And, furthermore, you expect them to be obeyed.”

Ayisha opened her mouth, then shut it without speaking. Jack studied her, really studied her, and this time he wasn’t focused on the way she looked without her illusion—he was concentrating on the entire person, and remembering everything that had been in the J. Ward book about Kerma, and the Heart of Zerzura, and the labyrinth.

Once again, an old memory surged up in his mind—yet another memory from five years ago. Jack’s eyes narrowed as his gaze focused on Ayisha’s right wrist. She wore something there…some kind of wristlet. It was nothing more than a scrap of woven stuff, but on the back of it he could see a sort of design picked out by a few stitches of pale green thread. Jack studied the design, turning his head first one way, then the other, trying to make it out.

Then he froze, his heartbeat resounding in his ears.

Greatly daring, he reached over to her, saying, “Excuse me, darlin’. I need to see…”

Ignoring Ayisha’s cry of protest, her attempt to jerk away, Jack took her hand, holding it up so he could see her wristlet. The seemingly random threads suddenly coalesced into a design. *I was right. The head of a lion…*

Jack’s fingers must have tightened on her wrist, because she cried out again, this time with an edge of pain in her protest. Carefully, he loosened his grip, but still didn’t let her go.

“Where did you get that?” he demanded.

“It’s mine,” she said. “It’s nothing, you can see that. Just a scrap of weaving.”

“It belongs to *you*?” Jack held her gaze with his own. He saw that her eyes were not dark, as he’d expected, but an arresting color, brown, with a hint of gold. Like bronze.

“Yes,” she said, through clenched teeth. “It is mine. Let go of me.”

Jack obeyed. She sat back, rubbing her wrist, staring at him warily.

Slowly, formally, Jack doffed his hat and leaned forward, inclining his head to her, in what passed for a bow when one was sitting cross-legged. “My apologies, Your Highness,” he said. “I didn’t know.” He hesitated. “I’m having trouble recalling your name. Princess…Amenrah? No. Ah, I remember. Princess Amenirdis. Welcome to my humble vessel, Your Highness.”

Ayisha stared at him. She could not have looked more shocked if Jack had conjured Neptune’s trident and waved it at her. It was a full minute before she could find her voice. “How…how do…how could you…” She broke off, shaking her head.

Jack sighed, and looked down at his hat, which he held in his lap. “I’m very sorry, Your Highness. I know because five years ago, I encountered your father, and he told me your name. And your brother’s name.”

“*You* met my father?” She put a hand to her cheek, and swallowed, taking in his sad expression. “He spoke to you? About me, and Shabako? How? Where?”

Jack nodded. “Yes, he spoke to me.”

Slowly he looked back up. “I met Pharaoh Taharka on the deck of a sinking ship. It was going down in flames. He was mortally injured, alas. He died in my arms, Your Highness.”

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Chapter Eleven
Pirates and Rogues

Jack watched the princess's eyes well with tears as she realized her father was dead. After a moment, Ayisha swallowed painfully, then dashed them away on the sleeve of her dress. "I knew that," she said, finally. "He left five years ago. I knew he wouldn't have stayed away so long unless... unless..."

She looked at Jack. "He left to find a cure for my little brother, Aniba. He was sick."

"I know," Jack said, as gently as he could. "He told me that. He told me he'd found the cure, too. He was on his way home to Kerma with it."

Ayisha nodded. "Yes. He promised to come home with it."

Jack hesitated, then said, "What happened...?" He let the question trail off.

She sighed. "Aniba died three months and a few days after my father left."

"I'm sorry," Jack said.

She nodded, and cleared her throat. "Thank you."

They sat there cross-legged on the deck in silence for a little while, both of them taking in these new developments. Finally, Jack gave the princess an appraising glance. "How do you feel now? I mean, physically? Still sick?"

Ayisha thought for a moment, then looked faintly surprised. "I feel...better." Her eyes widened slightly. "I actually feel a bit hungry."

He smiled. "That's good. Means you're getting your sea legs. Your Highness—"

She was already shaking her head. “Don’t, please. No one must know.”

“Very well. Miss Ayisha—”

She was shaking her head again, and this time, smiled faintly. “I think we might dispense with formality at this point, Captain Sparrow. You may call me Ayisha.”

“I’m Jack,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He extended his hand, and, solemnly, they shook. He looked around the little canvas enclosure, thinking how its flimsy “walls” would make it easy for someone to overhear them. “Listen,” he said. “Don’t take this wrong. Clearly, we need to talk more. You need my part of the story, and then we have to make plans. Plans that include, if at all possible, finding your brother. But this place”—he indicated their surroundings—“is not ideal for a private talk.”

Ayisha looked around, and nodded. “I see what you mean…Jack.”

“Let’s go up to my cabin. We can speak privately there. If you need a duenna or something, we’ll call Tarek to join us.”

“Duenna?”

“A chaperone.” When her expression remained puzzled, he amended, “Someone who is present to make sure… propriety…that’s, you know, proper behavior, is observed.”

“I see.” Again came that faint, elusive smile. Jack found it charming, and wished he could actually see her grin, or laugh out loud. Sternly, he reminded himself to stick to business. “I am not worried about having a…chaperone… Jack. As I told you, I can take care of myself.” She shifted on her straw tick. “I agree. We would be more private and comfortable elsewhere.”

Jack stood up, then extended a hand. She gave him hers, and he pulled her to her feet. “My shawl,” she said. Quickly he fetched it, then handed it to her.

The transformation was instantaneous. The moment Ayisha touched the fabric, her entire image shifted, in the

blink of an eye. Jack realized that the illusion-Ayisha was half a head shorter than the real woman. When she'd first stood up, she'd been only an inch or two shorter than he was. *Extraordinary*, he thought. *That's a very useful ability, to be able to cast illusions so convincing.*

Jack offered her his arm to steady her as they made their way across the main deck to the ladder. She climbed the steps slowly, cautiously, with him behind her, ready to steady her should she stumble. When they reached the weather deck, he led her aft, toward his cabin. Seeing Lucius Featherstone hurrying across the deck, Jack stopped him. "Lucius, Miss Ayisha and I will be conferring in my cabin for a while. Go ask cook for some broth for her, and bring it up straightaway."

"Aye, Cap'n!"

When they reached Jack's cabin, he cleared his charts off the table, then ceremoniously seated Ayisha in his chair. The windows were already open to catch the breeze. "Comfortable?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, looking curiously around the cabin. "Um. The colors…they're very…bright."

"Yes, cheerful, isn't it?" Jack said, busy in his pantry. He took a battered pewter goblet he kept for visitors, poured water into it, then wine. He had a bit of real bread left, quite stale now, but still easier to chew than biscuit. He haggled off a chunk, then brought the bread and the goblet over to her. Just as he did so, there was a tap on the door, which proved to be Lucius, with a covered bowl and a spoon. Jack took it and carried it over to the table. "There you go. Try dipping the bread in the broth, because it's a bit tough."

"Thank you, Jack," she said, taking the spoon. "This is the first food that has smelled good to me since we left Calabar."

"Just take a little bit," Jack advised, sitting down opposite her. "Go slowly."

“I shall,” she said, and spooned up a sip. Jack was fascinated to realize that she didn’t clank her spoon in the bowl, or slurp. Maybe that was part of being royalty, he thought, wryly. Knowing instinctively how to eat soup quietly. He went and poured himself a goblet of wine, then, after a moment’s thought, watered it down. He needed to keep his wits about him.

Jack had been thinking busily, ever since he’d discovered Ayisha’s real identity. If he’d been by himself, he’d have been tempted to break into a sailor’s jig. Fancy that, the Princess of Zerzura, sitting here, two feet away from him, serenely eating broth in *his* cabin aboard *his* ship! He gazed happily at the scrap of woven cloth circling her wrist that was, in reality, a beautiful golden bracelet—one of the three necessary to open the labyrinth. *One down, two to go*, he thought. He’d mentioned blowing open the door to the labyrinth—*and the treasure!*—to Cutler Beckett, but, really, using black powder to blow holes in things was so bloody *noisy*. It tended to bring guards down upon one’s ears, and cause all manner of havoc.

After he’d told her the story of how he’d encountered her father, he’d let her have a go at trying Tia Dalma’s compass, and they’d see whether her desire to find her brother made the compass react. Jack really hoped Prince Shabako was still alive—and still had his bracelet!—and not just because it would make things so much easier for him. He hoped the prince was still alive because it would break his extremely pretty sister’s heart if he wasn’t.

Watching Ayisha eat, he smiled at her, glad she was getting her sea legs and regaining her strength, because he really needed her to find Shabako. After they had collected her brother, it would be time to go after the third bracelet. And Jack was confident that he knew where it was.

All the while he’d been having golden fantasies, Ayisha had been slowly spooning up broth, nibbling broth-soaked bread, and, every so often, taking a sip of the watered wine.

Finally, she gave him that faint, enigmatic smile again. “I could eat more, but I’ll stop now. Thank you, Cap…Jack, I mean.”

Jack nodded. “Do you feel up to talking now?”

“Yes,” she said. “I want to hear how you encountered my father. Please tell me everything.”

He took off his hat, then tugged at his neckcloth, loosening it slightly. The breeze was pleasant, but they were still fairly close to the equator. She noticed. “Jack, please be comfortable. It will not offend me if you remove your coat.”

“Thanks,” Jack said, gratefully, and did so. Then he sat down on the table, because she was occupying the only chair, and because his story was going to take a while.

Looking down at her, he hesitated. “This won’t be easy telling. Or easy hearing,” he said, finally.

Ayisha nodded. “I am fairly warned, then.” Leaning forward, she put out a hand to touch the edge of his sleeve. She was clutching her shawl around her, but Jack fancied he could see a trace of the real woman in her expression of unflinching determination. “Jack…I want to know.”

“All right.” Jack searched for the best place to begin. “Five years ago I was on board a ship,” he said. “Not my ship. It wasn’t my choice to be there. I’d been impressed. Taken aboard by force.”

“Kidnapped?”

“Yes. It happens in the maritime world. I love the sea, but anyone can see it’s not an easy life. To get enough men to serve aboard vessels, sometimes they send out gangs to look for some poor lubber—man or even boy—who is in the wrong place at the wrong time, often in his cups—” Seeing her puzzlement, he hastily amended, “Drunk, you know. Then they just grab him and hale him off. Or cosh him over the head and he wakes up fifty miles offshore.”

Ayisha nodded. “I understand. It is like being made a slave.”

Jack blinked. “Yes, I suppose so. Except that they don’t actually *own* you. A press-ganged man can usually leave and go home…eventually.”

“I see.”

“My case was a little different than most, in that I knew the gang that ’pressed me.” He rolled his eyes as it all came back, shaking his head, and heard a bitter edge creep into his voice. “I was so young. And *stupid*. Got myself involved in something bad because I trusted a man I thought was me friend. He betrayed me.”

Reminiscently, Jack rubbed the spot behind his right ear, feeling the faint ridge there. “But the cracking over the head part and waking up far out to sea was the same. The ship was a brigantine, name of *La Vipère*.” He shrugged and grimaced. “Means ‘snake’ in French, and the name was appropriate. She was a pirate vessel.”

Jack took a deep breath. It was strange, talking about this, being honest about his past. She was listening so intently. Most people didn’t listen like this…they wanted to hear a little bit, and then they wanted to talk, too. Usually about themselves. But this woman was so focused; she knew how to listen. And, for someone who had lied so much up until today, there was a straightforward air about her that compelled honesty.

“*La Vipère*’s captain was named Christophe. Until the night he and his mates grabbed me, I thought he was my best friend.” He gave her a rueful glance. “There were signs that he was a…snake…but I didn’t see them. Or I didn’t let myself see them,” he amended.

He paused. This was harder than he’d anticipated. Jack could feel anger rising, simmering, at the memory of his time aboard *La Vipère*. “People are strange, love, and that’s a fact,” he said, with a breath of a laugh that had no humor about it at all. “Before all this happened, I’d been so restless, so dissatisfied with me life, I wanted nothing more than to get away from everything I’d grown up knowing. But

the morning I woke up aboard *La Vipère* and realized that it was all gone, and I could never go back, I missed it something fierce." He thought for a moment. "I'd had the most precious thing of all…*freedom*. And I never knew that until it was gone."

Ayisha nodded. "There is an ancient proverb from my homeland. It goes something like, 'The best way to learn to value what one has is to lose it past all retrieving.'" She gave him that faint smile of hers. "And I, too, learned to value my freedom only when it was lost to me."

"You know more about it than I ever will, love," Jack said. "What happened to you…" He shook his head. "It's a wonder you didn't just…go mad. I think I might have, in your place."

"No, Jack," she replied. "You would have figured out a way to escape. As you obviously did."

"Yes, well…I didn't, actually, as things turned out. I *thought* about it, of course. While I was aboard *La Vipère*, I just kept me head down and stayed to meself, as much as I could, doing whatever work I was ordered to do aboard ship. My strategy was that I'd wait until we were a mile or two from land, then I'd go over the side, at night. I'm a pretty good swimmer. But after I'd been sailing with those rogues for about three weeks, and we hadn't gotten a glimpse of land, I was starting to think I'd never get away. Then one morning, the lookout shouted that he saw a sail…"

When Christophe ordered the helmsman to change course, and the topmen aloft so they could come about, Jack grabbed the ratlines and started up, trying to ignore the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. It didn't pay to be distracted that high up, while making sail. He worked steadily alongside the rogues, not joining in their banter as they set the royals. He made a point of not looking west. He didn't want to see the sail that had become *La Vipère*'s

quarry. Jack knew how this chase was likely to end. The brigantine was fast. Their quarry wouldn't escape.

While *La Vipère* pursued the unlucky vessel, Jack worked, readying the ship for battle. He and a youth with curly blond hair that the mate addressed as Robby were ordered to ready the grappling hooks, then they were sent below to the gun deck to assist the gunnery crew.

Jack and Robby ran back and forth, carrying supplies, bringing powder from the magazine, obeying every order as fast as they could. As he worked, Jack found himself ruminating about the possible danger they might face, should this prize choose to fight rather than surrender. He'd always made it a practice to avoid fights when he could, but when he'd gone into combat with pirate comrades before this, Jack had never been afraid—because taking part in the fray was his *choice*.

Pirates tended to be philosophical about the possibility of death, figuring when it was your time, it was your time, and there was nothing to be done about it. Jack wasn't really afraid that he'd be killed outright today. But the thought of being *wounded* frankly scared him. He was under no illusion that this rogue crew regarded him as one of them. He hadn't even been offered the chance to sign the ship's articles—not that he would have, had they been presented to him.

Since he wasn't officially a member of the crew, if he were injured, these rogues might not raise a finger to help him. Jack figured there was a better than even chance that they'd simply heave him overboard. If they did that, he'd hear Davy Jones call his name, and have to face whatever came after one died. *I wonder how often the Pirate Lords summon Jones*, he found himself thinking, as he laid out clean swabs for the cannon barrels. *Do you suppose he'd give Esmeralda a message from me? Tell her that I miss her? Tell her I'm sorry I didn't say…more…that night?*

The thought of asking Davy Jones to be his messenger boy was so utterly ridiculous that Jack actually chuckled

aloud, albeit bitterly. *Stop thinking about her; you're moping like some kind of mooncalf, Jacky boy,* the voice in his head admonished him. *She's probably forgotten you already.*

Jack shook his head. *Esmeralda wouldn't forget me*, he insisted, silently.

Young Robby had looked up inquiringly at the sound of Jack's choked laugh.

Noting the young crewman's inquiring expression, Jack shook his head. "'S nothing," he said quietly. "Just me thinking too much, lad."

"It doesn't pay to think too much aboard this vessel." Robby's reply was equally soft. "Or see too much, either."

"I'll keep that in mind," Jack said.

When Jack came back up on deck, he found that *La Vipère* was rapidly overhauling the other vessel, and no wonder—she was a Dutch flute, a slow, wide-bottomed cargo vessel that stood as much chance of eluding the brigantine as a sloth had of escaping a jaguar on flat ground. Jack stood there, watching the distance between the two vessels narrow, wondering whether he'd be assigned to the gunnery crew, or the boarding party. *If I were Christophe, I wouldn't allow me unsupervised access to powder or the big guns….*

"Jacques!" The all-too-familiar hail came from behind him. "Where have you been keeping yourself, *mon ami*? I've barely seen you since you joined us."

Jack took a deep breath, schooling his expression to one of bland neutrality, before he turned to face Christophe. He inclined his head, acknowledging the man who stood before him. "Orders, Captain?"

Christophe's mouth quirked. "Ah, Jacques, that is not the way to be. We rogues saved your life, remember? If we had left you behind, *you* would have been the one that Captain Teague hanged at dawn."

Jack nodded, forcing a smile. "And I saved yours. I figure we're square, mate."

“That is better, *mon ami*! There is no sense in old friends quarreling over trifles, is there?”

Christophe was toying with him. Jack could see the mockery in his betrayer’s eyes, in his smile. He forced himself not to react. *He’s baiting me, trying to get me to do something stupid, so he’ll have some excuse to kill me*, he realized. *I can’t give him what he wants.* “Of course not,” he said, aloud.

Christophe stroked his freshly shaven chin thoughtfully. He was dressed in his turquoise coat on this bright morning. “Jacques, I have been thinking. Now that most of Borya’s fleet is gone, perhaps I shall become the new commander of our little venture. Have my own fleet, eh? And in that case, I’ll need captains for my vessels. Would you like to be one of them, Jacques?”

Jack tried to decide what answer would be best. He didn’t believe Christophe was serious for a moment. If he answered wrong, how long would he live?

The captain smiled engagingly. “Think of it! Instead of sending that flute we’ll be boarding today to the sea bottom, I could merely capture her, and give her to you, *mon ami*, to captain for me. Admittedly, she’s a bit unwieldy and slow, but one must start somewhere. What say you, Jacques?”

I say that I want nothing to do with you ever again, except perhaps to spit you on my sword and watch you die in agony, you vicious waste of air, Jack thought. This exchange was making his blood boil, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep his expression neutral.

He managed an unconcerned shrug. “You know, I think I need a bit more experience before I’m ready for my first command, mate. Perhaps the next ship will be a better match for me, eh?”

Christophe eyes narrowed as he tried to figure out whether Jack was being sarcastic. Jack maintained his bland

expression. He was only too aware that antagonizing Christophe would be beyond stupid.

Finally, after a long pause, Christophe blinked, and shrugged. “Very well, *mon ami*,” he said. “I will keep it in mind.”

“*Merci beaucoup*,” Jack said.

The rogue captain turned to leave, then paused, looking back at Jack over his shoulder. “I want you in the boarding party, Jacques. You may have a cutlass, but no pistol.” He smiled. “Alas, I fear I don’t quite trust you, Jacques.”

Jack did his best to look suitably wounded by this barb. He couldn’t tell how well he’d carried it off. Christophe hurried away to oversee the boarding party and Jack, mindful of orders, strode over to join the cutthroats who were standing poised by the portside railing, grappling hooks awaiting them. The mate handed him a sheathed cutlass and a baldric without comment. Jack slipped the baldric over his head, adjusted the hang of the weapon, then stepped away from the other crewmen. Gripping the hilt, he drew the blade, then swung it experimentally a few times, testing the weight and balance of it.

The rogues hoisted their true colors. Jack saw the red flag of no quarter, with its demon skull, flapping in the breeze.

The Dutch ship fired a round. It fell short.

Jack crouched behind the amidships windlass and stared at the deck, not wanting to watch. The ship lurched beneath his boots as *La Vipère* fired back, then the two ships traded shots for the next few minutes. Black smoke stung his eyes, and the smell of burned powder filled his nostrils. *La Vipère* sustained minor damage to her rigging, and a cannonball smashed one of the ship’s railings, but that was the brigantine’s only damage. From the shouts of the excited rogues, Jack knew when the flute’s mainmast fell. One of the next rounds was a lucky shot that took out her rudder.

The flute hoisted a white flag.

An ordinary pirate ship would have stopped there, boarded, taken the cargo and valuables, and then sailed away, possibly with prisoners to ransom, leaving the Dutch crew with a vessel that could be repaired and made seaworthy again.

Not *La Vipère*. The deck beneath Jack's feet heaved with the force of an earthquake as *La Vipère* fired a broadside.

As the smoke cleared, Jack couldn't stop himself from peering past the windlass. The broadside, delivered at close range, had brought down their quarry's remaining sails. The flute was listing a bit—she must have been holed below her waterline. The Dutch vessel had been given a mortal wound that would, most likely, send her to the bottom. But she'd remain afloat long enough for the rogues to strip her and her passengers of everything of value.

Jack gritted his teeth, feeling his breakfast lurch in his belly at the realization that the worst was yet to come for the passengers and crew of the hapless flute.

Automatically, he obeyed orders, standing by the splintered rail with a grappling hook, ready to swing it with the others.

Christophe barked commands, and Jack swung his hook with the other men. Swiftly, they drew the two vessels together. Jack could hear the screams and moans of the wounded, and see the passengers and crew milling around amid the splintered remains of wood and canvas that had, half an hour before, been a ship sailing under full canvas.

"Board!" shouted Christophe. Jack drew his cutlass and leaped up onto the brigantine's rail; then it was an easy jump to land aboard the flute.

The captain of the flute came forward, speaking to Christophe, but the rogue captain brushed by him, ignoring him. Jack knew, as the portly Dutchman did not, that there would be no terms—and no quarter. Quickly, the rogues assembled the passengers and crew, making sure they were disarmed.

After securing the crew and passengers, Jack spent the next hour hustling back and forth between the flute's hold and *La Vipère*'s deck, moving cargo. The Dutch vessel carried a load of tobacco, and the smell of it made his head swim as he and the other rogues, plus some of the flute's surviving crew that had been pressed into service, worked at transferring it.

Finally, when the cargo hold was emptied of everything of value, and Jack was gasping for breath, Christophe ordered all hands to "stand by to mop up."

Jack watched Christophe as the rogue captain casually turned to the portly Dutch captain, and, with a hard thrust, ran the unarmed man through. The Dutchman's eyes widened in disbelief, then he collapsed like a man cut down from the gallows.

That was the signal for the butchery. Moving mostly in silence, the rogues began slaughtering the disarmed passengers and crew as though they were cattle.

Some of the rogues were moving out, along the deck, evidently searching for anyone who had managed to hide. Jack joined them, moving aft, poking through the wreckage of the masts, spars, and sails, occasionally thrusting with the cutlass as though he'd found some hidden survivor. He saw Robby doing the same thing, and his eyes widened as he watched the lad grimly stab a man who lay with arms and legs at ugly angles, obviously already dead. The boy looked up, saw Jack watching him, then scurried away.

Jack continued aft, toward the poop, making a good show of searching for survivors. He found a body, and, looking away, ran it through the belly, to get blood on the blade of his cutlass. The feel of the dead, unresisting flesh made his breakfast rebel in earnest, and it was nearly a minute before he could fight back the nausea and continue on.

He'd nearly reached the taffrail, at the very end of the stern, when he heard the low plea. "Sir. Please…"

His heart slamming, Jack ducked beneath a flap of fallen canvas and saw the black man. He was a middle-aged passenger, judging by his clothing, and he'd obviously been badly injured by flying debris and falling wreckage. Blood stained his coat and britches, and smeared his mouth. Jack stared at him, wondering what a free black was doing here, in the Caribbean, as a passenger aboard a lumbering Dutch trader. Meeting a free black outside of the pirate community was most unusual.

The man was looking up at him, one hand raised in mute appeal. As Jack watched, his dark gaze focused on the bloody cutlass in Jack's hand.

Jack hastily laid the blade on the deck, then dropped down and crawled until he could kneel next to him. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wish I could help."

The man's breathing was labored, his English accented, but Jack had no trouble understanding him. "Have you… water, sir?"

"Sorry, mate, no," Jack said.

"No matter," the wounded man said. "Soon enough…I will no longer feel thirst."

Jack gave the amount of blood on his clothes and the strange angle at which his left leg rested an assessing glance, and figured the poor chap was right. "Just rest," he said, as soothingly as he could. He wished there was something he could do. But there was nothing.

"I will rest…later," the man said. "Please, sir. You must… listen. When the mast came down…I knew that I would die. As I lay here, I prayed to my god…Apedemak. In answer…to my prayer…he granted me a vision. He promised me…he would send…" He gasped for breath, then continued, "send me…a good man. And then…I saw…your face…in my vision."

"Me?" *The poor devil must be off his head with pain*, Jack thought. *Look at the angle of his leg…it's no wonder he's raving. And if he's not, then his god has a cruel sense*

of humor. The poor devil prays for "a good man" and he gets ***me****?*

"Yes," The dying man panted for breath. "Apedemak has sent you…to me. He has chosen…you. *Please*, sir. You must…*listen*."

Where have I heard the name "Apedemak" before? Jack wondered. "I'm listening," he said, reassuringly.

"I traveled here…from the island of Kerma," the man gasped. "I left…the Shining City, seeking a cure…for my little son, Aniba."

Jack's mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened. He couldn't possibly have heard him right—could he? "*Zerzura*?" he blurted. "You came here from *Zerzura*?"

The man's teeth flashed white stained with red, as he tried to smile. "You know of my island. Good. This proves… the god…sent you to me. I am Pharaoh Taharka…ruler of Kerma. I wanted…to find…" he broke off, gasping.

"The cure for Prince Aniba," Jack said. "Yes. I understand, Your, uh…Majesty."

"I knew…when I heard your footsteps…that you were the one. Apedemak led you…to me," the pharaoh said. "I prayed so hard…and I saw the lion god. He promised me…a good man, one who will…go to Kerma, and tell…tell my queen. I have been gone…many months. But my talisman guided me. I found the…cure."

Jack nodded. "That's good," he said. "You traveled a long way for it."

"I did," Taharka agreed. "The woman of power…I found her in a strange house on the Pantano River…swamp…so many candles…" He had to stop to catch his breath. "She said I must trade for…cure…" he gasped in pain, then moaned.

"Easy," Jack said. "You shouldn't talk. Rest." *He's talking about Tia Dalma*, he realized. *Her cures are famous, but she demands a trade.* His mind was still reeling at the notion that he was talking to someone from the legendary island.

Taharka's right hand lifted. He gripped Jack's wrist, his fingers unexpectedly strong. "I *must* speak…you need to *know*."

"All right," Jack said, gently. "All right. Tell me, then."

"I had cure…but now, it is lost," Taharka's voice was filled with sadness. "Tell them…I fulfilled…"

"You fulfilled your promise," Jack said. "You did. I will tell them." He took a deep breath, and realized he could smell smoke. The flute was on fire. It was a good thing the rogues had emptied the powder magazine.

"Tell my wife, Queen Tiyy. Tell my daughter, Princess… Amenirdis. And my son, who will be pharaoh, Prince Shabako. Tell them all…of my fate. Please."

"I swear, on pain of death, that if I can find them, I will tell them," Jack said. *As if I could find Zerzura!* But what harm could it do, to make a promise to ease a dying man's passing?

Hearing this, the pharaoh relaxed slightly. He tried to draw a deep breath, but coughed instead. At length he whispered, "Good. Good. My thanks, sir." His fingers loosened slightly on Jack's wrist. His eyes closed for a moment, then flew open, and his grip tightened. "One more thing…you must…return my talisman…to Zerzura."

"Talisman?"

"My bracelet." The pharaoh painfully raised his left hand, to touch a slender strip of woven grass that circled his right wrist. A small, flat gray pebble was centered on it, with a few lines scratched into the stone. Jack squinted down at the pebble, realizing that from the proper angle, the lines resembled a crude representation of a lion's head. "Watch," Taharka gasped. He closed his fingers on the strip of woven grass.

In the gloom beneath the canvas, Jack saw a greenish glow surround the wristlet for a moment. When Taharka moved his hand away, Jack gasped, seeing that the bracelet had transformed. It was now a golden marvel, with a pale

green stone, and the image of a lion's head, beautifully formed by the hand of a master goldsmith.

"Take it…" Taharka commanded, pulling it free with what was evidently the last of his strength. Jack raised his hand uncertainly, and the pharaoh pushed the bracelet into his fingers. Then his hand dropped limply to his chest. He gasped, and gasped again, unable to draw breath.

Jack slid his arm beneath the dying man's head and shoulders, raising him, hoping that would help him catch his breath. Taharka coughed, and more blood stained his dark skin, but the support helped; he was able to draw breath. "Thank you," he whispered. "May I know…your name?"

"Jack Sparrow."

"Jack…Sparrow." Taharka was making a last, valiant effort to speak, and it cost him dearly. "Never forget…Jack Sparrow. Apedemak has…chosen you…to protect the Heart. My son…my daughter…they have…the other two… talismans. Only all three…may open the labyrinth."

"I understand," Jack said, softly.

"You will sail to…Kerma. You will enter…the labyrinth. And…when the proper time comes, you will…remember… my words. You will…understand…the peril…to my people. Please…protect Zerzura…as I would."

"But…" Jack began,

"You…must go…Zerzura. Save…" His voice stopped.

"Sir?" Jack stared from the bracelet in his hand to the man's still face. "Pharaoh Taharka? Can you hear me?"

The body that he held suddenly felt heavier. Jack eased the pharaoh back down, and touched his throat. No pulse. *He can't hear me anymore. He'll never hear anything again in this world.*

He pulled his hand away, seeing that his fingers were slick with blood. Jack wiped them clean on the man's coat, then closed Taharka's eyes. Scooting away from the body a bit, Jack raised the transformed bracelet, eyeing it with

wonder. The gold gleamed, even in the shadowed shelter of the ruined sail.

“That,” came a voice from behind him, “was truly touching, Jacques.”

Jack whirled, startled, his heart trying to leap out of his chest. Christophe was standing behind him. How long had the captain been there? How much had he heard?

The rogue smiled coldly, as he bent over and plucked the golden talisman out of Jack’s hand. “I’ll just relieve you of that, *merci*, Jacques.”

Christophe turned the bracelet, admiring it as the sun flashed off the gold and the pale green gems. “It wasn’t so long ago that we spoke of looking for Zerzura, was it, *mon ami*? Small world, as you English say.”

Jack remained silent, turning over alternatives in his mind. There didn’t seem to be many, and none of them looked promising from where he knelt.

The captain’s smile abruptly vanished, and he drew his sword with a lightning motion. “Jacques, you silly fool. I fear you have made a grave error. Don’t you know any better than to try and conceal booty from your comrades? That’s an offense punishable by death, under *La Vipère*’s Ship’s Articles.”

“But I didn’t—” Jack began, then he shut his mouth. It didn’t matter what he’d done, or what he said now. Inadvertently, he’d given Christophe the excuse he’d been looking for to kill him. Unable to think of an alternative, Jack crawled out of the wreckage. As he began climbing to his feet, he casually dropped his hand down toward the hilt of the cutlass. *If I can just—*

Christophe’s booted foot came down on the blade. “No, Jacques,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

Defeated, Jack stood up and regarded the captain. “He gave it to me,” he said, “I didn’t take it. And I wasn’t trying to conceal it.”

Though you would have, Jacky boy, if Christophe hadn't come along when he did, the little voice of the man who'd undoubtedly condemned him to death back in Shipwreck Cove sneered in his mind. *You'd have hidden it very well….*

Christophe shook his head sadly. Holding Jack at bay with his sword, he bent down and nimbly picked up the cutlass. There was no sign of the Zerzuran bracelet. "You had better come along, Jacques," he said. "This ship will not remain afloat much longer. We need to ungrapple *La Vipère*. I cannot risk having the fire spread."

Motioning Jack to walk ahead of him, Christophe marched him back to where the two vessels were grappled together. The flute was low in the water, straining the grappling ropes, changing the angle a boarder had to cross, making the jump much more difficult.

"Move, Jacques," the captain ordered Jack, touching him lightly on the buttock with the point of his sword. "Across."

Raising his voice, he shouted, "Take Sparrow into custody!"

Jack had no choice but to jump the gap. He sprang up and across, and he made it, teetering on *La Vipère*'s rail. Hard hands grabbed him, hauling him down. Christophe made the leap as gracefully as a gazelle. "Ungrapple!"

Quickly, the crew freed the tension on the grappling ropes, then pulled them aboard. *La Vipère* bobbed upward, then began drifting away from the ship of the dead.

Jack listened numbly as Christophe shouted for "All hands!" He sagged in the grasp of the two burly rogues who held him, trying to figure out what to do.

He was Jack Sparrow, by Neptune's ballocks, and surely he'd be able to come up with some brilliant escape plan. Jack Sparrow, who'd tricked, cheated, lied, finessed, and misdirected his way out of innumerable tight spots in his life.

But rack his brain as he would, Jack couldn't come up with any way out his current predicament. His mind raced in

circles, until he felt like throwing himself to the deck and howling with frustration, but no brilliant piece of tomfoolery that would save his arse surfaced.

He gave the guard on his left a hopeful smile. “You know, without me, you’d have been hanged,” he essayed.

The guard looked at Jack as though he’d crawled out of the ship’s bilges. “Shut up, maggot,” he said. Then he nodded to his compatriot, who suddenly released Jack, drew back his meaty hand, and delivered an open-handed blow that snapped their captive’s head back. Jack shook his head, trying to get rid of the stars that were arcing across his vision, and spat blood.

The first guard backhanded him this time. “That’s for fouling our clean deck, maggot,” he said.

Jack sagged in his captors’ hands, careful to swallow the next mouthful of blood. At this point it was all he could do to hang on to consciousness, much less intuit some brilliant plan to get himself out of this.

By now the crew was assembled. In loud, ringing tones, their captain announced Jack’s attempted perfidy. “By rights,” Christophe concluded, “I should order that his throat be cut and his body flung overboard to feed the sharks.”

A chorus of cheers at this suggestion filled the air. Jack felt less than popular.

“*But* I am minded to be merciful,” Christophe added. “Because Sparrow did render us a service in bringing the keys to the dungeon, so we could break free of Shipwreck Cove.”

There followed some muted grumbling noises at this, but no one dared to protest. “Since we have no convenient island for marooning, at the moment,” Christophe said, “I propose that we put Sparrow in a boat and let him fend for himself.” He thought for a moment. “I will let him have oars,” he decided. “And I’ll let him have this cutlass.” He held it up. “But I don’t believe he deserves the traditional pistol and one shot.”

Jack struggled to move his swollen lips. “Water? Food?” he mumbled, trying not to sound too abject.

Christophe looked at the assembled crew. “What about it, lads? Food and water? What say you?”

“***NO!”*** The shout reverberated.

Christophe turned back to his prisoner. “They said no, Jacques. I am sorry.” He spread his hands in a “what can you do?” gesture.

Jack glared at him. *You’re sorry, all right.*

Christophe moved in closer, and dropped his voice to a near-whisper. “It does make me sad, Jacques, to know that I must now go after the treasure of Zerzura myself. I would have been happy to use that bracelet to open the labyrinth with you at my side, to share in the adventure.”

Hah, Jack thought. *Good luck finding it. And you won’t be able to open it with just one bracelet, you overdressed lunatic.* He had another mouthful of blood available, but sanity prevailed, and he did not spit it in Christophe’s face. In a boat, even far from land, he had a chance. With the captain’s sword sheathed in his guts, he had none. With an effort that made his throat raw, he swallowed again.

After that, things moved quickly. Christophe ordered his crew to make sail immediately. When *La Vipère* was picking up a bit of speed, the rogues placed Jack, the oars, and the cutlass in the smallest of their boats, then, with a speed that left him dizzy and gasping, they lowered the dinghy halfway down the side of the ship. Abruptly, they released the lines.

The boat fell, hitting the water with a tremendous splash. Luckily, it did not capsize. Jack grabbed for the oars, and began pulling away from the brigantine. He looked up to see Christophe and his crewmen, including young Robby, standing by the rail, looking down at him.

Jack’s control abruptly deserted him. “Ha! Esmeralda kissed *me*!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Christophe heard him, of that there was no doubt. Screaming curses in French, his erstwhile friend grabbed a

musket from one of the men who had been standing guard, and aimed it at Jack, who redoubled his efforts at rowing away. The musket spat fire—but not at Jack. The lad, Robby, had knocked the barrel up, so the shot went up into the air.

Then, as twenty pairs of hands grabbed for him, in one motion Robby slung something around his neck, leaped up onto the rail, then dove overboard. He disappeared beneath the waves.

Jack wasn't yet out of musket range, but he stopped rowing, waiting to see where the boy would surface. He didn't.

The rogues were firing at the water, a perfect fusillade of pistol and musket shots.

The air filled with smoke and the smell of burned powder from the barrage. Jack picked up his oars, feeling a bit regretful. Too bad the lad hadn't made it.

La Vipère was out of musket range now. Just as Jack dipped his oars in the water again, a pair of sun-browned hands clamped over the gunwale of his boat. Robby surfaced like a whale, gasping for air. For a long moment the boy clung to the gunwale, panting, then he raised his head and smiled at Jack. "Permission to come aboard?" he asked.

"I dunno," Jack said, dubiously. "Give me one good reason why I should let you climb into my boat."

The boy smiled, tossing his hair back. His blue eyes were brilliant, and filled with laughter. Reaching down for the leather strap Jack could see slung around his neck, he gave it a tug. "Because I have two bottles of water, some biscuit, and a bit of salt beef ?" he asked.

Jack smiled and extended his hand. "Welcome aboard, lad," he said. "Jack Sparrow."

"Robby Greene." They shook.

With some maneuvering, Jack managed to balance the boat so Robby could boost himself in. When the boy was safely on board, Jack, humming a jaunty pirate tune, fished

Tia Dalma’s compass out of its place of concealment in his waistband.

“What’s that?” Robby asked, then he peered closer. “Oh,” he said, in tones of profound regret, “it’s broken.”

“No,” Jack said. “It’s not. This is our salvation, lad.” Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the idea of the closest land that had food and fresh water. He pictured clear springs, clusters of ripe bananas, and delicious tortoises sunning themselves.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the compass needle pointing due east. Jack pointed. “That way, lad.” He pointed behind Robby, and cheerfully handed him the oars.

Over the next few days, he learned a lot about Robby Greene. At the age of ten, the boy had been grabbed by a press gang in Bristol when he’d accompanied his father to market to sell some pigs. Forced to serve as a powder monkey in His Majesty’s Navy, Robby had sailed aboard a vessel bound for the Caribbean. When the naval vessel had docked in Port Royal, he’d deserted, then found a berth as cabin boy on a merchant ship bound for England, determined to go home to his family. But, in keeping with Robby’s run of bad luck, somewhere off Bermuda the merchant ship had fallen prey to *La Vipère*, and Robby had wound up with a choice that faced many crewmen and passengers of captured ships—turn pirate, or be killed. He’d chosen to join Christophe’s crew, and had spent several years passing himself off as a ruthless rogue pirate.

“I stabbed a lot of corpses,” he said, ruefully. “And, of course, sometimes when we boarded, I had to fight for real, so I did.” The youth hung his head. “I’ve killed men, Jack.”

“We all have, Robby,” Jack said. “That’s life on the account. But that’s over now.”

Robby looked at him. “Over?”

“Yes. We’re going to become honest merchant sailors, we are.”

It took the two of them, rowing in shifts, five days to reach a small island that did indeed have fresh water, bananas, and tortoises. The island proved to be a popular place for ships to be careened. Jack and Robby had only a few weeks to wait before a ship arrived for just that purpose. Luckily, it was a merchant vessel, not a pirate ship.

They'd signed on to serve as crew aboard that EITC ship, and they'd never looked back….

* * *

Jack stopped talking, and drained his cup. "Excuse me. Talking is thirsty work," he said to Ayisha, and went to the pantry to refill the goblet.

When he returned, the princess looked up at him. "Did poor Robby ever get home? Back to his family, and the farm?"

Jack nodded. "Yes," he said, sadly. "A year or so after we began sailing together, we docked in Bristol. Robby went looking for his family, only to discover that some kind of pestilence had swept through his village, and both his parents had caught it and died. He had two sisters, and they survived, but they'd both gotten married, and no one knew what their names were, or where they'd gone. So…" He shrugged.

She nodded. "At least you were able to save each other."

"That's true," Jack agreed. "He's a good shipmate, Robby. And…" He hesitated, because he no longer used the term lightly. "…A friend."

"So the evil Christophe still has my father's bracelet?" She frowned. "That is very bad. We need that talisman, if we can possibly retrieve it. For five years, no one has been able to get into the labyrinth! We have been unable to have access to our most important religious shrine, and the treasures of our people. The priests have spoken about trying to dig a tunnel underneath the door, but there are…

traps…there, for the unwary, both physical and magical. Do you think this rogue pirate Christophe still has it?”

“It’s bloody likely,” Jack said, then reddened. “Excuse me language, Your Highness. What I meant was that Christophe knew enough about Zerzura that I don’t believe he’d put the talisman up as a marker in a game of chance.”

Unconsciously, her fingers traced the embroidered lion’s head on the scrap of fabric that was her own bracelet. “Do you think there is any chance that after we rescue my brother, we can locate Christophe and attempt to get the bracelet back?” She shook her head. “Buy it, perhaps, or steal it? It can be of no use to him, except as a bauble to wear.”

Jack smiled slightly. *You bet I’m going to go looking for Christophe, love, as soon as I’m free to do it. That greedy rogue won’t be able to resist the chance at that treasure; he’ll cooperate. At least at first…*

Aloud he said, “Let’s concentrate on finding your brother, first, then we can talk about that.”

Ayisha nodded, then sighed, putting a hand to her head somewhat dazedly. “So much to take in,” she murmured. “I feel almost dizzy with all I have learned today.”

“I know what you mean,” Jack said. “It’s enough to make your head spin like the needle of my compass.”

Her eyes sharpened. “About this compass, you mentioned…what, exactly, does it do?”

Jack stood up, turned his back, and extracted it. “I got it from an Obeah woman,” he said, “when I was just a lad, younger even than Chamba. Tia Dalma has powers I never heard of any other Obeah woman having. I believe this will help us find your brother, if he’s still alive.”

“Do not say ‘if,’ Jack.” Her voice was fierce.

“Very well,” Jack said. “Scratch the ‘if.’ This should show us where your brother is.” He looked at her. “Just a suggestion…you might want to remove your shawl. Just in

case one kind of powerful magic might somehow affect another type. Cancel each other out, so to speak."

She nodded, then slipped off her shawl and tossed it across the table.

Jack watched her, wondering if he'd ever become accustomed to that amazing transformation. She was so very lovely…

He sat back down on the table, reminding himself to stick to the matter at hand. "Now," he instructed, "I want you to think about your brother. Concentrate on his face, and how much you want to find him. Don't think about anything else, love…savvy?"

She closed her eyes and held out her hands. "Yes," she said, "I understand. I have him in my mind."

Jack leaned forward and gently placed Tia Dalma's compass into her cupped hands. Ayisha jerked violently, nearly dropping it, and her eyes flew open. She cried out, in her own language, a sharp exclamation that might have been a curse.

"What happened?" Jack said, putting his cupped hands below hers, in case she dropped his compass.

Ayisha was staring down at the compass in awe. Reverently, she stroked one finger along its casing. "This is…an extraordinary thing of power," she said.

"I know."

After a few moments of staring down at the compass, gently stroking it, as though it were alive, she sighed. "I'm going to try again."

Jack watched tensely as she closed her eyes. Her lips moved, soundlessly repeating one word—her brother's name.

The needle of Tia Dalma's compass swung, and then settled into place. Jack craned his neck to see its face. The needle was pointing almost due West.

"If this compass is any indication," Jack said, quietly, "your brother is alive, Ayisha."

Slowly she opened her eyes and looked down, then back up. Sudden tears flooded her eyes, but she didn't give way, only leaned forward and handed the compass back to Jack.

Jack snapped the lid shut and looked up, into those amazing bronze-colored eyes. "I'm going to escort you back to your quarters now," he told her. "You need to lie down and rest. You've been through a lot today. And after you're settled, I am heading for the helm, to make a course change. We'll follow the compass until we find him."

Wordlessly, she nodded, and then quite suddenly, the expression Jack had been waiting to see flooded her features, making them almost glow with happiness.

Ayisha smiled, a real, genuine, joyful smile. Her teeth were lovely, white and perfect. Jack smiled with her.

She reached for her shawl, then paused. "There is one more thing, Jack."

"What's that?"

"How do you plan to explain Tarek's and my presence aboard your vessel to your crew?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm the captain. I don't need to explain anything." He regarded her for a moment, then added, "What is there that needs explaining?"

She gave him an ironic look. "Jack," she said. "You really don't see it, do you?"

"See what?"

For answer, she stretched out her fingers, until they almost—but not quite—touched his hand as it rested on the table. "Look," she instructed. "What do you see?"

I see a lovely woman I want to kiss, then swoop up and carry over to my bunk, Jack thought, honestly, then he gave himself a mental shake and focused, looking down. "I see our hands," he said. "Mine is pretty dirty, specially me fingernails," he admitted, after a moment. "Yours is clean, smaller but much shapelier, and softer. A pretty hand."

She drew in a breath that sounded half amused, half exasperated. "What *color* are they, Jack?"

“Oh,” he said. “That.”

“Yes, *that*.” Jack sat back and regarded her as she continued. “Jack, you bring two slaves aboard, and you expect your men to treat us as though we are *white*? Just ordinary passengers?” Ayisha laughed, but it was not a happy sound. “And, because of my disguise, I’ve seen some of your crew make the sign against the evil eye these last two days, when I’ve come up on deck. Chamba has told me some crewmen are saying I’m bad luck, maybe even a witch, and that my presence aboard caused that storm. ‘Women aboard a ship are supposed to bring bad luck,’ he said. The crew who believe that wouldn’t welcome a white woman, much less me.”

Jack nodded slowly. “I take your point. I’ll talk to them, spin some tale that will let them know how important you are to Mr. Beckett, and to the success of this voyage—and to me. The crew accepted Chamba. They can learn to accept you. As for Tarek, I seriously doubt any of my men would have the stones to risk angering *him*.”

She nodded tiredly, then gave Jack a faint, wan smile. “He is…large.”

“Too right, love.”

After he’d escorted her back to her “cabin” and left her to Tarek’s ministrations, Jack stood for a moment at the bottom of the ladder on the gun deck. Opening his compass, he closed his eyes, concentrating on Christophe…

Memories swept him. Christophe…the rogue butcher who had murdered dozens, maybe hundreds, of innocents. He’d killed one of the few men Jack had ever respected, the Pirate Lord Don Rafael, two years after Jack had left Shipwreck Island. *Shot him in the back, the craven toss-bag.* Christophe…*that misbegotten scoundrel pawed Esmeralda and terrorized Marie.*

Christophe…*the sodding wanker who betrayed, kidnapped, and tried to kill me.*

Jack focused his mind, remembering Christophe's handsome, sneering face as he'd seen it last, looking down at him as he sat in that little dinghy, without a scrap of food or a drop of water.

Jack opened his eyes, saw the compass needle spin once, then it came to rest pointing a couple of degrees northward of due west.

Grinning cheerfully, he snapped it shut, then ran lightly up the ladder to the weather deck. Slowing down, as befitted the dignity of a captain, he ascended the final step. But under his breath, he was humming a jolly pirate tune—the same one he'd hummed that day Christophe had set him afloat. *I'm on my way, de Rapièr. And this time, there will be a reckoning.*

The *Wicked Wench* was heading west.

Cutler Beckett sat behind his oak desk in the East India Trading Company's Calabar office, reading his just-delivered post. The *Fair Wind* had docked that morning, bringing packets of mail. Beckett had just finished reading his cousin Susan's letter, thanking him for the recommendation he'd made for her son, and saying that the boy had indeed become apprenticed to the EITC office. Beckett hadn't troubled to conceal his yawns as he read.

But the next missive made him sit upright in his chair, fully alert. It was from Lord Penwallow.

> My Dear Cutler,
>
> I write this in the hopes that it shall find you in the best of Health, notwithstanding the dreadful Climate of your current posting. I am currently enjoying the lovely summer Weather at my Surrey Estate, "Mayfaire," where I am supervising the packing of some of our furnishings to be transported to the new house currently under construction in New Avalon.
>
> My Overseer, Tobias Montgomery, reports that the building is going well, and that all of the building

materials transported by your Captain Sparrow arrived promptly and Safely. I am very pleased with the young Captain, and believe that he may have a promising Future with the Company.

Lady Hortense and I have been trying out names for our new home. What think you, Cutler, of “Sweet Providence”? Since our principal crop is to be, of course, sugarcane, it seems to us Appropriate!

Which brings me to my main reason for writing. Montgomery has been working a minimal crew of Blacks to clear fields and prepare them for planting, but he needs more Hands. I can think of no one in whom to put my trust more suitably, with a clear conscience that the task will be performed thoroughly and well, than yourself, Cutler. Accordingly, will you please begin gathering a cargo of approximately two hundred prime Blacks for shipment to my new plantation on New Avalon? At least one hundred and fifty will need to be prime strong Bucks, and the rest may be Wenches, preferably those of gentle nature, and trainable in the Arts of keeping a Civilized Household. Montgomery will need the cargo before the spring planting is to begin. If your Captain Sparrow is available to take them, that would also be most Pleasing to me. That young mariner is so careful with cargo, I feel sure that under his Oversight, we will lose no more than, one hopes, a quarter of the cargo during the Crossing.

I did pay a visit to Court a fortnight ago, and spoke to several of my Acquaintances there about your service to the EITC and how, under your supervision, our profits had increased a full twenty-five percent. Such devotion to Duty of course enriches the Royal coffers, too, as the natural flow of economics in our Society dictates. I believe I made a good case for your receiving some Official Recognition of your contribution. (I dare not be more specific, but I believe you fully comprehend my meaning.)

With that in mind, my dear Cutler, please plan on journeying with me next Spring to see “Sweet Providence,” where my lady wife and I shall be only too pleased to begin repaying some of your gracious hospitality to me. Following your visit, I believe it would be most Advisable for we two to take a ship back to England, so that I may introduce you to my Friends at Court, so they may, as they say, “put a face” to the

man whose Name and Record they shall be bringing before the King.

Until we meet again, I remain, faithfully, your Advisor and Friend.

Yrs Truly,

Viscount, Lord Penwallow

Cutler Beckett ran his thumb over the elegant seal, smiling. At last! Things were falling into place. All of those evenings spent endlessly smiling as he listened to the never-ending drivel of minutia regarding His Lordship's life and the lives of his relations were finally bearing fruit. Soon, possibly by this time next year, he seemed certain to be *Sir* Cutler Beckett.

His smile widened as he pictured himself at Court, in the presence of the king, undergoing the ceremony that would make him a Peer of the Realm. Something none of the other Becketts had ever been able to accomplish.

And he had done it all on his own. He had power and wealth. Soon, he would have the title to go with them.

Beckett was sitting there, leaning back in his chair, idly twirling a new, just-trimmed quill pen, eyes unfocused while resplendent visions of himself being knighted filled his vision, when his secretary tapped at the door, then opened it. Cutler Beckett started as guiltily as though he'd been caught out doing something unsavory with barnyard animals. He glared at Chalmers. "What is it, Chalmers? I was *working*."

Chalmers was far too intelligent and experienced to contradict his employer. "Yes, Mr. Beckett, I see that. My apologies, but Mr. Mercer is here, and he said he has come at your request."

"Oh, yes. I've been waiting for his return. Please show him in."

"Very good, Mr. Beckett."

Ian Mercer entered the office moments later. He nodded at his employer as he removed his hat, then his trademark black gloves.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Mercer,” Beckett said. “How is your investigation progressing?”

“I fear I’ve run into a snag, sir,” Mercer said.

Beckett raised an eyebrow and waved him to a seat. “Indeed? What has happened?”

“As I reported to you, sir, I believed I had traced the big male slave to the Dalton farm. I went out there this morning, prepared to purchase the buck, only to discover that he disappeared over a week ago.”

“Escaped?”

“Apparently so, sir. Mr. Dalton reported that he vanished from the male slave barracks one night. The dogs traced his scent to the road leading into Calabar, then they lost it.”

Beckett’s gaze sharpened as he gazed at Mercer. “Wait a moment. You said he disappeared…when?”

The operative nodded confirmation. “Exactly, Mr. Beckett. He escaped the same night that the *Wicked Wench* left Calabar.”

Beckett settled back into his chair. “Not a coincidence, then.”

“Doesn’t seem likely, sir.”

“Jack, Jack, Jack…” Beckett murmured. “My, you certainly were thorough, I’ll give you that.” He looked back at Mercer. “All we can do now is wait for his return, then.”

Mercer didn’t quite grimace, but his expression was definitely on the sour side. “I suppose so, Mr. Beckett,” he agreed grudgingly.

“There’s no way to know when Sparrow will return,” Beckett said. “We have no idea where Kerma is. He said if he discovers that the J. Ward book is correct, and it’s not far from the African coast, he’ll go there, verify its location, then turn around and return to Calabar without going on to Antigua. But it could be out there in the middle of the

Atlantic. Or off the coast of South America, or the Colonies. There's no way to know."

"How big is it?" Mercer asked.

"Nobody knows. Not terribly large, I should think, or someone would have discovered it by now, magic notwithstanding. That reminds me, Mr. Mercer. We need to start planning our assault on the island."

"There's no way to know if Sparrow will return," Mercer pointed out.

"I have faith in Jack," Cutler Beckett said, with a faint smile. "At any rate, getting plans in place now will enable us to move all the more swiftly when he returns with the bearings. I anticipate it will take a good-sized force—for a private undertaking, at least—to capture and subdue the main city, Zerzura. Of course, having modern technology will help considerably. Judging by what Duke said, they're barely using iron for spear blades."

"To capture an entire city, Mr. Beckett, will take a private army."

"Which I intend to have," Cutler Beckett said. "I can divert perhaps a hundred of the EITC defensive troops from Calabar and the other nearby slaving ports. And of course I can use the EITC defensive warship, the brig *Sentinel*, to add to the firepower of the merchant ships I divert for this project. But we must have additional troops, and supplies."

Mercer thought for a moment. "I'd say to be safe, Mr. Beckett, you'll need a force of at least three hundred fighting men, that includes both foot soldiers and officers, and four, perhaps five ships to transport them. And of course you'll need crews for those vessels, and support personnel for the troops, as well as supplies. Plus sufficient quantities of ammunition and powder."

"An additional two hundred soldiers," Cutler Beckett put his chin in his hand as he thought. "We won't find them in Africa."

“Not if you want men who know how to use firearms, Mr. Beckett. I’ll need to recruit in England, and on the Continent. It’s a good thing we’re currently at peace; there are bound to be more cashiered soldiers willing to do mercenary work.” Mercer thought for a moment. “How particular do you want me to be, Mr. Beckett? There are men of every stripe wandering the stews of every major city. And of course there are men in prisons whose fines could be paid, thus making them available to us—*and* beholden to us.”

“As long as they’re good shots and can follow orders, I don’t care what their relationship with the authorities is, Mr. Mercer.” Beckett waved a hand. “Prisoners are fine.”

“Sometimes you can find seagoing mercenaries, too,” Mercer said. “Privateers, pirates, and—”

“No pirates,” Beckett said sharply, his voice gone cold. “I *loathe* pirates.”

“Right, Mr. Beckett,” Mercer said. “Untrustworthy murdering scoundrels.”

“Precisely,” Beckett said.

Mercer stood up. “I’ll write up some lists, Mr. Beckett, and bring them to you for your approval, if that’s acceptable.”

Beckett nodded. “That’s fine, Mercer. You obviously have the skills needed to organize an expedition of this type. Thank you.”

“Of course, Mr. Beckett,” Mercer said. “I’ll get right on it.”

After Mercer left his office, Cutler Beckett sat in silence, as visions once again filled his mind’s eye. But these visions, unlike the previous ones, were grim and terrifying—the stuff of nightmares that still plagued him.

After he’d left home so precipitously to work for the EITC, young Cutler Beckett had only worked in the London office for a few months. Once his superiors had verified that he was competent, they’d assigned him to a tour of duty at the EITC office on Gibraltar. Beckett had boarded the

Lindesfarne in London, excited to be fulfilling his ambition of seeing the world.

All had gone well with the voyage until, off the coast of Spain, the *Lindesfarne* was captured by pirates—taken without a single shot being fired. Herded up on deck by the pirate crew of *Le Requin*, Beckett, seething with fury, had stood with the other passengers, many incoherent or weeping with terror. Finally, the pirate captain appeared. He was a handsome villain who wore an elegant emerald coat. Moving with a leisurely swagger, he'd inspected his captives in silence, then introduced himself as "Captain de Rapièr."

While his crew of cutthroats stripped the *Lindesfarne* of everything valuable, the captain interviewed his captives, so he could decide whether they should be held for ransom or sold into slavery.

When the captain approached Cutler, the eighteen-year-old, in a red rage at having his career plans thwarted, defied him, demanding their release, promising that he'd see them all hang. At first Captain de Rapièr had been amused by Beckett's audacity and spirit, chuckling at him as though he were a cute, but yappy, puppy. Then Cutler had unwisely informed the captain that the cut of his elegant coat and its fastenings was considered completely out of fashion in both London and Paris. Seeing from Captain de Rapièr's expression that he'd finally scored a palpable hit, Cutler had then laughed in his face.

The pirate captain got his revenge by turning Cutler over to his crew, saying they could "play" with this one. With cries of joy, the pirate crew slapped young Beckett around, then formed a gauntlet and spanked him with the flat of their swords. But that was just the beginning of his ordeal.

Stripping him naked, they hoisted him upside down, to dangle fifty feet in the air. Cutler had hung there, spinning slowly, hearing them laugh, too terrified to struggle. By the

time they'd lowered him down, he was choking and sobbing incoherently. Captain de Rapièr had laughed uproariously.

The worst threat was yet to come. As Cutler lay sprawled on the deck, surrounded by the jeering cutthroats, several of them announced their intention of torturing him. They took out their knives, remarking that he really didn't need all of his fingers and toes, did he?

Before the pirates could fulfill their threat, Beckett, terrified beyond reason, had simply…gone away, just as he had that long-ago day outside the schoolhouse. His glassy, unblinking stare and uncanny stillness had spooked the superstitious pirates. Even when they prodded him to the point of drawing blood, he failed to react. Uneasily, Cutler's would-be torturers backed away; they'd wanted a lively, thrashing victim. A near-catatonic one was…unappealing. Muttering about demonic possession, they'd left him alone.

By the time Beckett recovered his wits, and was allowed to put on what was left of his clothing, all his earlier defiance was gone. Tears streaking his face, he'd confessed to Captain de Rapièr that he came from a wealthy family, and that they should send their ransom demand to Jonathan Beckett. Cutler also told the captain that he worked for the EITC, and this bit of information, unthinkingly revealed, would be his salvation.

Having dispatched the ransom notices, the pirates anchored off a remote section of the Spanish coast to wait for replies. To pass the time, the crew put their captives to work, forcing them—in some cases using the lash—to perform the most difficult, menial, and disgusting shipboard chores. They assigned Cutler to cleaning the bilges, a task so revolting it was the equivalent of trying to empty a sewer, bucket by bucket.

As the weeks went by, the ship grew fearfully clean, ransom money arrived, and Beckett's fellow passengers were freed. But no word arrived from Jonathan Beckett. Cutler watched other captives exchanged for ransom

money, day-by-day, week-by-week, until he was the only one left.

With a bitterness that scoured his soul of whatever remnants of kindness and decency it had still possessed, Cutler realized that his father had gotten the ultimate revenge for the accusations his son had hurled at him during their last meeting—he'd ignored the ransom demand.

Rather than spend his life as a slave, Cutler resolved to seize any opportunity to leap overboard and end it all. But, at the last possible moment, the captain received a letter from the EITC. An EITC official had authorized the office to offer a modest sum for the return of their new employee. The official who had signed the letter offering the ransom was none other than Viscount, Lord Penwallow.

Captain de Rapièr had sneeringly announced to Beckett that the ransom offered by the EITC was probably more than young Cutler would fetch in a slave auction, undersized and scrawny as he was, so he'd decided to let him go. The exchange was arranged.

After Captain de Rapièr had gotten the ransom money, he turned Cutler loose. Reeking, starved, and scarred, the young man stumbled back onto dry land. The first thing Beckett had done when he reached his posting in Gibraltar was to write a letter to the EITC official, Lord Penwallow, thanking him for the EITC's faith in him, and promising to pay back the ransom amount.

Pay it back he had, and the next ten years had seen him rise rapidly in the EITC ranks.

Beckett had never spoken a word about his ordeal to anyone. He still suffered from nightmares, dreams where he was lying on the deck of the *Lindesfarne*, unable to move, while filthy, leering faces peered down at him, spat on him, and stabbed him with cutlasses. Some men might have turned to drink, or gambling, or wenching in an effort to drown those memories…but that wasn't Cutler Beckett's

nature. He found surcease in accumulating power. Wealth, too, but if you had power, he'd found, wealth was easy to accrue.

And once he'd taken Zerzura, his power would be increased immeasurably. A knighthood would be just the beginning….

Sitting in his Calabar office, Cutler Beckett determinedly dipped his new quill into his inkwell, then began making notes to himself, based on his discussion with Mercer. His mind busily sorted through the roster of EITC merchant ships, determining which ones would be best employed as troop carriers for the expedition to Kerma.

As Mercer had noted, if their strategy would be to bombard Zerzura until the inhabitants were too disorganized to mount an effective resistance, they would need plenty of ammunition and powder. So the ships he selected for the expedition would need to be large, to carry as many troops as possible, and they'd need to be heavily armed.

Beckett smiled slightly as he wrote the first name down on his list.

Wicked Wench.

How fitting, he thought. *Jack, hurry back. We have a lot to do….*

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Chapter Twelve
Shabako

As though to apologize for their earlier rough treatment, the sea and the winds were kind to Ayisha during the *Wicked Wench*'s voyage westward. Midway across the Atlantic, they experienced several days of steady rain, but it was a warm rain, not accompanied by high winds or thunderstorms. During the temperate seasons, rain was welcome—it allowed crew members to wash clothes and replenish their water supplies. The breezes carrying them westward moderated the oppressive heat they'd experienced off the African coast. All in all, the crossing was as favorable as she could have wished.

Her initial seasickness did not return, and Ayisha rapidly regained her appetite and her strength. As the days went by, she could feel the months of constant fear and tension slipping away, becoming memory instead of the reality of her daily life. She regained her smile, and even laughed at times, especially with Tarek. It was good to speak her native tongue and spend time with someone from home; it nourished her soul. She began teaching him English.

Ayisha had never been the type of royal to sit idle. She was accustomed to working, using the talent given her by her god to weave cloth for the temple priests and priestesses, or assisting her mother with the day-to-day oversight and rule of the kingdom. Queen Tiyy had developed the custom of making a circuit of the island for five days out of every month, to stay in contact with her people, and pass judgment in civil matters. Ayisha accompanied her on these circuits, riding with her mother's

honor guard on her spirited mare, while the queen drove her chariot. Enforced idleness did not sit well with the princess; she needed to move, to exercise her mind, her body, and her skills. As soon as she could keep food down, she began walking circuits of the weather deck, her shawl tied around her waist during good weather, or draped over her head when it rained.

True to his word, Jack called his crew together and spun them a very creative tale to explain Ayisha and Tarek's presence on his ship, as well as their current mission to locate and free Shabako. Ayisha had been in Jack's cabin while he spoke to them, and had heard him quite clearly through the keyhole as he addressed them. According to the captain, Ayisha and Tarek were members of a previously unknown tribe in northern Africa. The "Kermalayan" tribe, Jack explained, produced beautiful cloth, textiles, and embroidery that the EITC was eager to acquire.

"So the EITC wants exclusive rights to trade with these people, savvy?" Jack explained to his assembled men. "Everything was going along fine with the trade negotiations, until this Kermalan prince and his royal aunt, some kind of dowager princess, along with one of their guards, got snatched by slave hunters while they were on an expedition to buy cloth from another tribe. So the word went out to the top EITC officials to do anything in their power to gain the Kermalayan king's good will.

"Lads, I'm proud to tell you that none other than our very own employer, Mr. Cutler Beckett, managed to track down, locate, and purchase the dowager princess and the guard, but the brother had already been put on a slave ship bound for the New World. So Mr. Beckett sent the princess and the guard along with us, so they can identify the young prince. My orders are to find and acquire this captured African prince."

A low murmur of surprise followed Jack's revelation. "I hardly need to tell you, mates, that this assignment is a

feather in our caps. Mr. Beckett is counting on us! Returning their kidnapped royalty to the king of the Kermalayan tribe should pave the way for them to agree to exclusive trade with the EITC! If we succeed in our mission, it could mean a tidy bonus for every member of this crew."

An excited murmur broke out on deck, along with a few muted cheers. "I know I can count on you all to do your duty, mates," Jack finished. "Dismissed."

Ayisha listened to the crew scatter, speculating excitedly about how they'd spend their extra money, and had to hand it to Jack—he'd spun exactly the right tale to ensure his crew's cheerful cooperation; it was an inspired mix of truth and fantasy.

Only Jack, Robby, and Chamba knew that the story Jack had spun for his crew's edification wasn't true. After Jack's talk with his men, Ayisha no longer saw anyone make the sign of the evil eye. The crew treated her politely, with respect, but no warmth. That was enough for the princess. She had Tarek to talk to, and, increasingly, Chamba. It wasn't long before Ayisha regarded the young sailor as a friend.

To pass the time on the voyage, she asked Chamba to teach her to read English, and every day they practiced together for an hour. Ayisha made rapid progress. In a few weeks she was able to work her way through poems by John Donne, Walter Raleigh, and William Shakespeare. Reading matter aboard the *Wicked Wench* was limited, but Jack had a few books, Robby had a well-thumbed Bible, and, surprisingly, Frank Connery had a book of Shakespeare's sonnets. Ayisha took delight in being able to read again, though many of the references required explanation.

Together, Ayisha and Tarek took advantage of their new sea legs to explore every nook and cranny of the *Wicked Wench*. In the beginning the princess was frightened of the guns, both large and small; the first time Jack had the crew drill with muskets and pistols, Tarek had to quickly escort

her back to their “cabin,” because the sound of gunfire brought back vivid memories of the day the slave traders captured them. Chamba patiently reminded her that there were pirates on the high seas, and that the ship and crew had to be able to protect themselves. She remembered Jack telling her that the two rogue pirates, Borya and Christophe, were still capturing ships and giving no quarter. Firearms and cannons, it seemed, were necessary in this world. She forced herself to watch every small arms drill.

By the time Jack held the first drill with the big guns, Ayisha had managed to conquer her fear. She stuffed her ears with bits of fabric, and watched the gunners as they readied and fired the big twelve-pounders.

She was fascinated by the way the gun crews swabbed out the barrels of the cannons, loaded them with powder and shot, then touched off the powder holes with their slow matches. The sweating crews slaved over their cannons, competing to see which team could fire the fastest and come the closest to hitting the floating targets Jack had had the carpenters make for firing practice.

As the *Wicked Wench* sailed westward, Ayisha grew increasingly restive with her enforced idleness. She had no skills as a sailor, but she *did* have other skills, useful ones. Sailors were hard on their clothing, and, while some of them were good with a needle and thread, many others were not. She asked Chamba to pass the word that she would be willing to mend clothing if crewmen provided her with the thread. Hearing this, Chamba grinned broadly and promptly brought her a pair of loose sailor’s pants with a huge rip in the seat, and a shirt that most people would have torn into rags. He also provided a skein of thread.

Ayisha set to work and mended them so quickly and expertly that, seeing her handiwork, other crewmen passed along their clothing. When she’d first made the offer to do mending for the sailors, she’d done so out of a desire for useful work to occupy her hours, but her mending had an

unforeseen, but positive, benefit. Over the next fortnight, she noticed a distinct change in the attitude of the crew—while walking the weather deck for exercise, most of the sailors she encountered nodded and smiled.

The Zerzuran woman often worked at her mending chores up on the weather deck, where the light was good. Her needle flashed through fabric smoothly, with the ease of long experience, and she stitched away, watching the crew as they made sail, spliced lines, or performed any of the dozens of tasks necessary to keep the *Wicked Wench* in good repair and seaworthy, ready for anything from foul weather to pirate attacks. Watching the men drill with cutlass, pistol, or musket was the most interesting activity. Jack and Robby held practice sessions almost every day.

Jack worked at honing his skills, too. He practiced swordplay with Robby, Lucius Featherstone, and Etienne de Ver. After Tarek expressed interest, Jack added the Zerzuran guard to his list of fencing opponents. The style of fighting taught to soldiers on Kerma featured very different techniques from the English, French, Italian, or Spanish "schools" that Jack had been exposed to in the past. Jack had the eunuch demonstrate his favorite moves, and began practicing with them, introducing them into his fencing repertoire.

Ayisha was puzzled as she watched Jack practice. In stark contrast to his usual blithe insouciance, Jack was honing his fencing skills unrelentingly, almost grimly. When he had no one to practice with, he drilled by himself, using assorted targets he set up, repeating each move until he could do it perfectly.

One day, when he finished a session, he half-collapsed onto the bottom step of the ladder leading up to the quarterdeck, puffing like an overridden horse. As his breathing eased, he sat there, staring gloomily at nothing, swigging thirstily from the canteen he'd brought with him. Concerned, Ayisha picked up her mending and made her

way across the deck to sit down near him, tucking the skirts of her only dress neatly around her bare feet.

She pointed to the canteen. “I’m thirsty. Will you share?”

Jack came out of his brooding reverie with a start, as though he hadn’t seen her approach. “Sure, love,” he said, passing it over.

Ayisha took a gulp, finding that it was watered ale. “You have been practicing hard, Jack.”

He nodded.

“Do you practice like this with the sword during every voyage?”

Jack shrugged. “I try to keep in practice,” he said, “but no, I don’t practice every day.”

“Then why now? What is different?”

He gave her a somber glance. “Just restless, I suppose.” His mouth tightened. “I want to be ready…just in case.”

Picking up her mending, she set to work again, making small, even stitches with the ease of long practice. “Just in case? Jack, do you believe you will need to fight, in order to rescue my brother?”

“No,” he replied. “Whenever possible, I prefer not to use brute force, love. Trickery is smarter and works better.” He took another swig from the canteen. “Armed assaults tend to be messy, and are often ill-conceived and poorly executed.” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “All that blood and…stuff. Me, I’ll take intelligent cowardice over foolhardy bravery any day.”

“I agree,” Ayisha said, with a faint smile. “I suppose it’s most likely my brother will be working on some plantation. Do you have any ideas for how to go about rescuing him? It cannot be easy for slaves to get away, or more of them would manage it.”

Jack shrugged. “Haven’t gotten that far yet, love. I’m still mulling it over. This is the kind of situation where you make it up as you go along.”

“I see.” She put the last stitch in place, knotted the thread, then bit it off neatly. “There,” she said.

He gave her a smile. “My crew looks nearly as shipshape as the *Wench*, since you’ve been fixing their clothes.”

She nodded. “And they smile at me and greet me pleasantly now. I’m nearly finished with the things they’ve given me. I work fast.” Reaching over, she poked a finger through a ragged tear in the loose sleeve of his shirt. “It’s time to start on your clothes, and Robby’s. Mr. Connery brought me his mending last week, so he is done.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Jack said. “Any sailor learns to mend his own clothes. Some of them get quite handy at it.”

“But you are not one of those types of sailors,” she pointed out. “I have seen examples of your mending skills.”

He chuckled. “‘A hit, a very palpable hit.’”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a quote from a Shakespeare play called *Hamlet*, about a prince who can’t decide whether or not to avenge his father’s murder by killing his uncle, the king. The final act of the play is a fencing match, and, early on, Hamlet touches his opponent, Laertes.” He demonstrated the concept by holding up his hand and then poking himself in the palm lightly. “When you touch an opponent with the tip of your weapon, it’s called a ‘hit,’ savvy? It’s how they score matches.”

Ayisha puzzled over this. “If Hamlet was a prince, why did he not become king when his father died?”

Jack frowned thoughtfully. “It’s been a long time since I read it. I believe his uncle, Claudius, more or less usurped the throne. He also married Hamlet’s mum.”

“Well, if Prince Hamlet could not make up his mind, his uncle was right to take the throne,” Ayisha declared. “An indecisive ruler is a disaster for a kingdom.”

Jack laughed. “That’s a refreshing way of looking at it. Claudius as the heroic savior of Denmark, and Hamlet as the dithering villain.” He took another drink, then offered the canteen to her. She took a sip, and handed it back.

“How many more days to reach Antigua?” she asked.

He shrugged. “A few days, perhaps a week, at most. Depending on the wind, as you’ve doubtless learned by now.”

Ayisha nodded. “Then I shall need more work to keep me busy. May I look through your sea chest, to see what needs mending?”

“Sure,” he said. “Chamba knows where I keep the key.”

“Good,” she said. “I know I do not have to do this, Jack. But it’s something I *can* do, and it helps pass the time. Life at sea can be…” She searched for a suitable word. “All the same, every day. What is the word?”

“Monotonous? Tedious? Dull? Unvarying? Tiresome? Boring?”

She laughed. “Thank you. I believe monotonous is the term I shall choose.”

Ayisha spent the better part of the next three days, on and off, mending the entire contents of Jack’s sea chest—stitching up every ripped seam, every ragged tear, and patching all the holes. She even picked out his own clumsy attempts at mending and re-did them neatly. When she finished the clothing, she darned all of his stockings. Then she did the same thing with Robby’s sea chest.

Neither Ayisha nor Tarek left the *Wicked Wench* during her stay in Antigua. Free blacks were so unusual that they were in danger of being accosted by local authorities, who might well demand to see their official papers—and, of course, they had none. So the two Zerzurans perforce remained aboard, watching the off-loading, then the loading, of cargo.

Chamba did take shore leave, but was under strict orders from Jack to remain with his mates at all times. “I

have no papers for you, lad," Jack reminded him. "So if you got picked up as a runaway, I'd have a bloody difficult time getting you released, savvy?"

"Aye, Cap'n."

Ayisha watched Chamba head off down the gangplank, in the company of his mates. She sighed, thinking of how good it would feel to have solid earth beneath her feet. But Jack was right; it was too risky for her to leave the ship. Feeling depressed and frustrated, she decided to go back to her cabin. Perhaps she'd take a nap.

As she headed across the weather deck, she heard footsteps thudding up the ladder from the main deck, and Jack emerged. He was wearing his newly mended snuff-colored coat. "Ayisha!" he exclaimed. "I was looking for you."

She tried to smile. "You have found me, Jack."

"I just took a look in me sea chest, and found your handiwork. I haven't thanked you for all that mending you did," he said. "So…thank you." He gave her his most charming smile. The sight of him inexplicably cheered her, and she found her own smile turning genuine.

"You are most welcome, Jack," she said.

"Wait, that isn't all, love," he said. "I'd meant to return them to you before, but I forgot." Holding out his hand, he opened it, to reveal her Zerzuran gold earrings. "Small enough thanks for what you did, since they're yours, after all, but, here you are, darlin'."

Ayisha smiled. "My earrings! My father gave those to me. I am so glad to have them back." Quickly, she slipped the wires through the holes in her earlobes.

Jack nodded. "They're beautiful." He gave her a wry glance. "I'll look forward to seeing you wear them as your proper self one of these days…and when you do, their beauty will fade by comparison."

It took Ayisha a moment to puzzle this out, but when she did, she could feel heat rise in her cheeks. She dropped

her gaze, not knowing what to say. “Thank you, Jack,” she managed, after a moment.

“Well, I’m off for a bit of shore leave,” he said. “Robby will be on watch while I’m ashore, so if there’s anything you need…”

“I’ll be fine.”

She watched him head off across the weather deck, then down the gangplank, and thought how lucky she was. What if Jack Sparrow had actually been the man Cutler Beckett had believed him to be? If Jack had been that man, it would have meant the destruction of her homeland, the end of all she held dear.

But Jack Sparrow wasn’t anything like Cutler Beckett or Mercer. He was, as her father had said, a *good* man, a man who was doing his best to fulfill his promise to the dying pharaoh. Recalling how she had treated him for those first few weeks after they’d met, Ayisha bit her lip. She’d been cold, cynical, and imperious.

Touching an earring, she thought, *I owe him so much. How can I ever repay him?*

As she headed down the ladder to the main deck, she found herself thinking about the contents of Jack’s sea chest. She’d seen Jack’s new clothes, folded and put away, saved for special occasions. They were well-made garments, of good-quality fabric, but they were completely plain. Knowing Jack, he probably wished they *weren’t* plain. A slow smile curved Ayisha’s mouth as she recalled the rose and periwinkle paint in his cabin. Jack’s taste definitely ran to the bright and flamboyant, though he’d apparently never had the money to indulge his inclinations in his clothing. As she reached the bottom of the ladder, she paused, as an idea struck her. *I have the gold and silver thread, and the colorful embroidery silk. Why not put them to good use? I enjoy doing fancy work. Why not?*

Turning around, she headed back up the ladder, moving briskly. She had seen where Chamba put the key to the

captain’s cabin. She’d fetch the clothes now, while he was gone, and set to work in secret. *I’ll surprise him….*

By the time the *Wicked Wench* left Antigua, loaded with barrels of molasses and sugar, Ayisha had begun her project. She used the gold thread to embroider the big turned-back cuffs and the lapels of the collarless jacket, decorating them with intricate scrollwork. By the time she was finished, Lord Penwallow himself would have been pleased to don that coat.

Next she turned her attention to the canary-colored waistcoat. The front side of the vestlike garment took much more time than the coat to embroider. Current fashion in men’s waistcoats dictated they be worn long, nearly as long as the coats, which reached all the way to the wearer’s knee. Using all her god-granted talent and skill, Ayisha created a fanciful design of twining vines, using pale green thread that was tasteful, but vivid. The green was the same color as the gem in her bracelet, the chip that had been taken from the Heart of Zerzura itself. Luckily, that silk thread had been purchased for a new waistcoat for Mr. Beckett, one she hadn’t made before she left. So she had many skeins of it.

When the vines were finished, she accented them with little white lilies and blue flowers, using the same shade of blue as the coat.

After the ship left Antigua, Jack continued northwest as though he were following the Triangle, but that was coincidental; his course headings were actually determined by Tia Dalma’s compass. It led them northwest, past Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and Cuba.

Ayisha completed her work on the waistcoat the day the *Wicked Wench* passed the Inagua Islands, just north of the eastern tip of Cuba. She waited until Jack was busy up on the bow, then smuggled the embellished garments back into his sea chest.

The next morning, as Jack checked the compass heading, he gave Ayisha a satisfied nod. “It’s my guess Shabako is on New Avalon, love. It’s the northernmost island where the soil is rich enough to raise sugarcane, and a lot of slave ships are bound there. I’ve been there many times, and I know the general layout. We’ll put in at the biggest port, Viviana, where the Viviana River flows into the harbor. All the plantations transport their cane products by boat, so each plantation has its own dock. We’ll row down the river, and you can watch the compass as we pass each dock.”

Ayisha could hardly believe they were actually coming to the end of the voyage. “How long before we arrive?” she asked.

“New Avalon is about forty miles north of the largest of the Ragged Islands. We’re sailing into the heart of the Bahamas, now. Lots of shoals, so we’ll anchor by night, and only sail by day. Too risky, otherwise. So…two days sail, most likely,” Jack said, and then opened his mouth to add something, but Ayisha beat him to it.

“Depending on the wind, of course!”

Jack laughed.

Two days later, Jack, Chamba, and Ayisha rowed up the Viviana River in one of the *Wicked Wench*’s boats. As Jack had said, each plantation had its own dock. Ayisha kept a close eye on the compass.

As they reached the fourth dock along the river, the needle stopped swinging and pointed directly inland. Ayisha started down at it, her entire body suddenly rigid with tension. She had to wet her lips before she could speak. “This is the one.”

Jack nodded, and motioned to Chamba to turn the boat around. “Back to the ship. I’ll head into town and find out who owns that plantation.” He smiled wryly. “Small world. If

I’m not mistaken, our target lies next door to Lord Penwallow’s new home.”

When Jack returned from his venture into Viviana, he called a council of war in his cabin. Ayisha and Tarek sat at the table, Jack and Robby took their places on the bunk, and Chamba sat cross-legged on the deck. It was hot in the cabin, but the stern windows did allow a bit of a breeze.

“I had a few drinks at The Mermaid’s Tale,” Jack said, “And the tavern keeper proved most helpful. Seems the plantation where Shabako is located is called Wickhaven, and it’s the property of one St. John Fenwick. He’s been here seven years, which makes his place one of the oldest on New Avalon. Fenwick owns over one hundred slaves.”

“Do we have enough money to just buy Shabako from Fenwick?” Robby asked. “I’ve got a bit put by.”

“So do I,” Jack said. Robby gave him a surprised glance. Jack shrugged. “Male slaves fetch a good price, so I frankly doubt it, but that would be the simplest way of getting him. But before we go there to buy a slave, we’d need to be sure the lad is, in fact, at Wickhaven.”

“Cap’n,” Chamba said, “you need to think ’bout this. If you turn up at a big plantation askin’ to see every buck they got on the place, ’cause you only want one particular slave, it gonna look pretty strange. While it be true that someone might offer to buy a skilled worker, the way Mr. Beckett arrange to buy Miss Ayisha, ain’t nobody gonna go lookin’ for one particular field hand. And from what I been told, that’s what Shabako most likely to be.”

Tarek said something in his native language, and Ayisha hastily translated. “Tarek was a field hand at Mr. Dalton’s farm. He confirms that it would definitely arouse suspicion for a stranger to show up and buy one lad not much older than Chamba. Most slave owners wouldn’t want a youth, they would want a man in his prime.”

“Do we care if they’re suspicious?” Robby said. “What difference does it make, after all? We’re just going to sail away, and leave them with a puzzle.”

“There’s another problem,” Jack said. “If I go to Wickhaven to buy Shabako—and this is presuming we have enough money to make a reasonable offer—how will I be able to pick him out from the others? I’ve never seen the lad.”

“There is a family resemblance,” Ayisha said. “His eyes are like mine, same color skin, and hair, same nose and chin.”

“In that case…” Robby was obviously choosing his words with great care. “He should be…distinctive. You’ll be able to recognize him easily, Jack.”

Jack opened his mouth to point out the error of this, then realized that Robby was referring to Ayisha’s illusion. He kept silent. Neither Robby nor Chamba had ever seen her true face. But it wasn’t his place to correct them.

He glanced over at the princess. She was looking from Robby to Chamba, then back again. Suddenly her shoulders straightened, and she rose to her feet. “I need to tell you something. I feel we are friends, as well as allies in this mission. Robby…Chamba…my appearance at the moment is an illusion I created to…” She faltered, then looked to Jack for help.

“When she was captured, Ayisha created an illusion to help keep her safe from the slave traders and others who might want to harm her, if they saw her true appearance,” Jack said.

“Yes. So…this is my true self.” She slid the gray shawl over her shoulders, and dropped it to the deck. Jack heard Robby and Chamba gasp. “I believe you understand my reasons, now,” Ayisha added, and sat back down.

As Robby and Chamba sat there, staring wide-eyed at her, Jack cleared his throat loudly. “Back to the business at hand, mates. You can see now why I probably wouldn’t

stand much chance of recognizing Shabako. I might be able to pick him out of a group of a dozen slaves, but not a hundred. It would take forever."

Chamba never took his eyes off Ayisha's face as he spoke, "Cap'n, and there be another problem. You go there and talk to this Mr. Fenwick, say you want just one slave out of all of them. You look and look, and finally you see Shabako, say. All the while, Mr. Fenwick, he be noticin' how picky you are, how you really don't want anyone but this one slave. What he gonna do about the price he ask to sell him?"

"He'll raise the price," Robby said. "Figure he can get double, maybe triple what the lad is worth, if Jack wants him that much."

Jack had been doing some calculations in his head. "This won't wash, mates," he said. "We couldn't possibly raise that much. The going price these days for a male slave in his prime would run, say, between one hundred and two hundred pieces of eight. In pounds sterling, the currency the EITC uses, that would equal between sixty and one hundred and twenty pounds. And, if Fenwick caught on, Chamba's right. He'd demand more than the going price."

The sailors gazed at each other, daunted. Sixty pounds! That was a *lot* of money. Fifty pounds was enough to maintain a middle-class family in England for a year.

"I got five pounds saved, me," Chamba said. "How about you?"

"I have twenty," Robby said.

"And I have fifteen pounds," Jack said. "Forty pounds between us. Damn."

"What about my earrings?" Ayisha said, with a slight catch in her voice. "You could sell them."

"No, love," Jack said. "They're pretty, but they're not worth that much. The stones are tiny. Gold is sold by weight, and they're not that heavy. It's not worth your giving them up." He sighed, then added, absently, "I wish now I hadn't

bought those new shoes today. But there was a cobbler's next door to the tavern, and he gave me a good price."

"Jack, the price of the shoes wouldn't have made any difference," Robby pointed out. "You needed those shoes. I've seen the holes in your soles."

Jack rose from the bunk and began to pace. "We need to think of another way," he muttered, then brightened slightly. "A bit of a libation might help. Always helps *me* think…"

Heading over to his captain's pantry, Jack returned with a motley assortment of battered tin cups and pewter tankards, carrying a bottle of wine beneath his arm. Uncorking it, he poured a dollop of wine into each of the cups, then passed them out to the group. "One cup short," he said, looking at the last of the wine, and shrugged. "Oh well. Bottoms up."

Raising the bottle to his lips, he polished off the contents, grimacing as he encountered the dregs. The others sipped their wine in silence. Jack waited a few minutes, then looked around at the group. "No brilliant inspirations yet?"

Everyone shook his or her head.

"C'mon, mates!" Jack said. "*Think*!" Rising, he collected the cups and the empty bottle, then stumbled. "Damn!" He looked down. "Oh. My new bloody shoes."

He put the cups into the pantry, then bent over and picked up the shoes. "Better put these away before someone else falls over 'em," he muttered, to nobody in particular. Going over to his sea chest, Jack threw the lid open.

Ayisha raised her head, watching intently.

Jack looked down, eyes widening as he saw the sparkle of gold. "What's this?" Reaching down, he pulled out the blue coat, and shook it out. "This isn't—" He looked more closely. "It *is* my coat. But…" He looked over at Ayisha and fingered the embroidery on the cuff. "You did this, love?"

Smiling shyly, she nodded. “It’s the fashion. Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” Jack said. Reaching down, he picked up the waistcoat. “And this…it’s a work of art.” He smiled. “I never thought I’d be able to afford anything like this. Thank you!”

“I’m glad you like it,” Ayisha said.

“Try it on, Cap’n,” Chamba urged.

Jack obediently stripped off his battered old coat and waistcoat, then pulled on the embroidered waistcoat, buttoning enough buttons to hold it together. He slipped the blue coat over it, then looked down at himself. “My word,” he said, slowly. “I look a right dandy, don’t I? Just like a lord.”

Turning, he struck a pose, and said, in a perfect imitation of an upper-crust accent, “Good afternoon, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Lord Spar—”

Breaking off, Jack stood there for a long moment in silence. Then he smiled, a smile that gradually widened to a roguish grin. “This gives me an idea. It’ll work, I know it will!”

Bright and early the next morning, a hired barouche left Viviana, and turned onto the main road leading to the plantations, increasing speed to a spanking trot. The open vehicle was drawn by a team of smartly matched chestnuts, and driven by a big, liveried coachman wearing a white powdered wig that contrasted with his dark features. A young, slightly built footman dressed identically stood balanced behind the passenger seats, which contained only one occupant: an elegantly dressed young man with a head of long, dark, elaborately curled hair beneath his plumed hat. The highborn passenger sat upright, his nose cocked at just the right angle, as the barouche barreled down the road.

When the vehicle reached the small but elegant sign that read “Sweet Providence,” it turned off on the narrow lane, and proceeded along it until it reached the almost completed plantation house.

Pulling up before the front door, the coachman brought the vehicle to a smart halt, then set the brake. The footman leaped down from the back to open the passenger door and let down the steps, so the occupant could descend. The elegantly dressed young man rose and climbed out of the barouche, turning carefully so his lightweight dress sword, in its decorative sheath, would not trip him up.

Leaving his slaves to wait with the vehicle, the young man strode confidently up to the beautifully carved front door of the big plantation house, where he knocked briskly. Moments later, a white butler appeared at the door. After a swift assessment of the visitor’s clothing, the man bowed, rather deeply. “Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning,” said the young man. “Is Tobias Montgomery here?”

“Mr. Montgomery is out back, sir,” the butler replied. “May I tell him who is calling?”

“Certainly,” the young man said. “Please tell Mr. Montgomery that the Honorable Frederick Penwallow, Baron Mayfaire, is here to see him, and that my father, Lord Penwallow, sends his greetings.”

The butler’s eyes widened. “*Yes*, sir! I’ll fetch him immediately. Please, won’t you come in and make yourself comfortable, sir, while you wait? I’ll tell the maid to bring you some refreshment. We weren’t expecting you, sir! Did you just arrive?”

The young man vanished into the house. His slaves, who had heard the exchange, glanced at each other and gave a small, conspiratorial nod.

After a while, the head groom came running from the direction of the stables. The man bustled up to the coachman, and nodded. “Mornin’. Mister Tobias, he sent me

to fetch Lord Penwallow’s son’s horses and see they’re watered. C’mon with me, it be good to get out of this sun.”

The three slaves climbed into the barouche and drove around behind the plantation house, where the recently built stables stood. They were still so new that one could smell the fresh cut wood. There weren’t many horses residing there yet, just the plantation teams and the overseer’s mount. After tending to the team, the three slaves sat down on benches built beneath the trees, overlooking the newly constructed paddocks, to await their masters’ convenience.

After a refreshing cup of tea and a mid-morning bite, Mr. Montgomery and young Baron Frederick exited the rear door of the plantation, and stood on the enormous patio before the newly installed Venetian fountain, watching teams of gardeners busily working on various flower beds.

Montgomery had already led the newcomer on a tour of the nearly completed house, and now it was time to see the plantation grounds. The two set off, walking through the gardens, heading first for the stables and outbuildings.

The tour of the nascent plantation took only an hour or so of fairly brisk walking, because there wasn’t that much to see yet. Slave crews were still clearing ground for plantings. The smell of burning trees and vegetation lingered sharp in the nostrils as they walked past the soon-to-be crop fields, where other slaves worked at grubbing up roots and turning over the soil.

After they’d seen the fields, Montgomery led the owner’s heir on a tour of where the buildings and equipment necessary for processing the raw sugarcane were still under construction. They finished the tour with a walk down to the river to see the newly constructed dock where boats would, one day, transport the barrels of molasses and sugar to the port.

As the two men walked back toward the plantation house, Tobias Montgomery kept up a running commentary

on the sugarcane business and its complexities. He stressed the need for more labor to clear more ground.

Lord Penwallow's heir nodded. "I believe my father mentioned to me that he planned to purchase an entire shipload of prime blacks, and ship them here as soon as may be." Young Baron Frederick looked around him as they walked, and sighed, his expression clearly that of a man who had expected to see more.

"It takes time to clear the fields, and prepare them for planting, sir," Montgomery said, earnestly. "I've kept the crews working hard, I assure you. I haven't spared the lash."

"Yes, yes," said Frederick. "Of course. I understand. It's just that…" He trailed off with a sigh.

"Just what, sir? Is there something I can do?"

"I *had* hoped to tour a functioning plantation, one where the crops were actually growing, and production was taking place, you know," the baron replied, in his elegant accent that practically dripped breeding and wealth. "On our way here, I saw that our neighbor appears to have a smooth-running operation that is actually producing molasses and sugar." His handsome features beneath the long, thick, elaborately curled coiffure frowned thoughtfully. "What *was* the name of his place? Wickham, was it?"

"Wickhaven. Belongs to St. John Fenwick. He's a nice chap, sir. I'm sure he'd love to give you a complete tour; he's very proud of his place." Montgomery glanced at the position of the sun, and added, in a conspiratorial tone, "Tell you what, sir. His lady wife keeps a notable table. They're always inviting me to dine with them. If we were to drive over now, we're certain to be asked to dine with them. And afterward, I know Fenwick would be delighted to show you over the place."

The baron hesitated. "I wouldn't think of imposing…"

"You wouldn't be, sir! Mistress Fenwick will be thrilled to have a young man of your rank and breeding dine with

them…and you're a neighbor to be, sir!" He smiled slyly. "St. John has a daughter…pretty lass."

Baron Frederick considered this. "Very well, that sounds ideal, Mr. Montgomery. We can take my hired barouche."

They headed for the stables.

* * *

Jack took his seat at Mistress Fenwick's dining room table with a murmured word of thanks to his hostess.

He couldn't help noticing that he'd been seated beside sixteen-year-old Rebecca Fenwick. Tobias Montgomery had told the truth; she was indeed a pretty girl. Her honey-colored hair was dressed in elaborate ringlets, and she wore a pink afternoon dress trimmed with delicate handmade white lace.

Jack smiled complacently. Rebecca's lace was *almost* as elegant as the Brussels lace cascading from the cravat of his own—rented—shirt. The lace spilled like sea foam from the neck of Jack's embroidered waistcoat, and also hung below his extravagant gold-embroidered cuffs, so long it nearly concealed his knuckles. Jack picked up his wineglass and took a sip. When he placed the fragile goblet back down on the damask tablecloth, he took a moment to admire the way his fingers looked against the hand-blown crystal. Even he, who had spent half an hour in the predawn dimness scrubbing them, could scarcely believe the cleanliness of his own fingernails.

He smiled at Miss Fenwick, and she shyly smiled back, before blushing and looking down at her plate. Her complexion was the fabled English peaches-and-cream, and there were only a few tiny freckles on her pert little nose. Her hazel eyes were kept modestly cast down, as she picked up her fork, but Jack could tell she was aware of "Baron Frederick's" every move and word. From the way her mama had eyed him, Jack figured that her daughter had been instructed to be *very* nice to their unexpected visitor.

A serving man came by to fill his plate, and Jack glanced sideways again, discreetly, at the bodice of Miss Fenwick's dress. For her age, she filled it out very well, he decided. Idly, he wondered just *how* "nice" he might induce the young lady to be, if he could manage to get her alone. But after a moment, he squelched his growing fantasy. He wasn't here for dalliance, and it would hardly be fair to Lord Penwallow, who was a harmless old fellow—if more than a bit pompous—to seduce his neighbor's daughter, and risk possible repercussions and ill-will.

Not without a bit of regret, Jack turned his attention to his host, and the mealtime conversation.

Thanks to his memory of that luncheon at Cutler Beckett's house, he navigated his way through the courses and cutlery like a true blue-blooded nabob. "Frederick" entertained his hosts with tales of his fox-hunting prowess, most of them based on assorted woodcuts and hunting prints that Jack had seen hanging on walls in pubs. His tales about Caesar, his renowned hunter that could leap any obstacle, were met with gasps of admiration from Miss Fenwick.

"So tell me Miss Fenwick," Jack drawled, "when were *you* 'blooded,' m'dear?"

"Blooded?" she repeated, sounding perplexed. "I'm sorry, Baron, I don't know what that means."

Jack smiled tolerantly. "No need to be embarrassed, eh wot? *I* was blooded at the age of twelve, but most don't manage that."

She looked at him and smiled, then shrugged slightly. "I've never heard that term, Baron."

Jack gave her a kindly smile. "Blooded means you've been in at the kill, and marked with reynard's blood," he explained. "Only the very *best* riders can keep up with the hounds the entire run, eh wot?"

"Oh," said Miss Fenwick. "It sounds…very exciting, Baron."

Jack gazed around the table in feigned bafflement. “Do you mean to say you really don’t ride to hounds, Miss Fenwick? What about you, Mr. Fenwick? Or you, Montgomery?”

St. John Fenwick patted his mouth with his napkin, perhaps hiding his discomfort at being found lacking in civilized pastimes. “I fear not, Baron Frederick. You see, English foxes are not native to New Avalon.”

“*No foxes*?” Jack stared at them all in utter dismay. “Lud, no! You can’t be serious!”

“No foxes, Baron,” Montgomery said. “We do ride, however.”

Jack cleared his throat. “I see. Well, I’m sure there are other worthwhile pastimes.” He applied himself to his beef.

As the meal ended, Tobias Montgomery asked St. John Fenwick whether he’d consent to show Baron Frederick around his plantation, and Fenwick graciously replied that nothing would please him more.

Montgomery himself begged off from accompanying them, saying that he was expecting a delivery of goods. He refused Fenwick’s offer of a horse to ride back, saying he would take the shortcut path back through the woods to reach Sweet Providence. “It isn’t but a twenty minute walk,” he assured his hosts.

Then he turned to Jack. “Unless you would like me to stay, Baron Frederick?” he asked.

“Lud, no.” Jack smiled, and nodded. “You tend to your duty for my father. I assure you that I’ll inform him how faithfully you perform your work, Mr. Montgomery. I can find my way back from here, mark my words. Thank you for the tour this morning. I shall be seeing you again, soon.”

“It was my pleasure, Baron!”

Jack and Fenwick waved farewell to the overseer from the columned portico of Wickhaven, as Montgomery set off for Penwallow’s plantation.

After the overseer had disappeared into the woods, Jack formally took leave of his hostess, bowing over her hand with all the elegance he'd watched Christophe display so many times to Esmeralda. Then he said farewell to Rebecca, but instead of simply bowing over her hand, he kissed her knuckles, then, gazing deeply into her eyes, he vowed to return, his voice so full of meaning that he might have been vowing undying devotion. He gave her one last, faintly wicked smile, and left her standing in the doorway, blushing and looking a bit weak in the knees.

That *was fun*, Jack thought, stepping down the two steps from the wide, columned porch. Without looking around, he snapped his fingers, and his two "slaves" fell in behind him. One carried a flask, filled with watered wine, the other a silk parasol to shield his "master's" head from the unrelenting Caribbean sun.

Jack and St. John Fenwick headed down the road leading to the fields, with Jack chattering away, expressing his avid interest in how sugarcane was grown, harvested, then turned into molasses, sugar…and rum. Jack found himself wondering whether Fenwick's tour might include some free samples of high quality rum….

First, they toured the fields, where sweating, nearly naked Africans were toiling in the sun, cutting cane. It was grueling, backbreaking labor. The men, every muscle outlined on their lean torsos, grunted with effort as they chopped the cane with machetes, letting it fall to the ground, where other slaves, smaller, slighter ones, bound it into bundles, carried it over to carts, and piled it up. Still other slaves drove the creaking, loaded carts to the places where, Jack knew, yet more slaves loaded the cane into a press, then teams of sweating slaves pushed against giant, many-spoked wheels that turned those presses, extracting the liquid from the chopped canes.

Sugarcane production had, Jack knew, the highest mortality rate of any crop grown in the New World. Cane

plantations always needed fresh infusions of slaves; few men lasted as long as five years after being unloaded from the slavers.

Now, as he stood beneath the shade of the parasol held by Chamba, watching the cane choppers work, Jack wondered how any of them survived even a day of this kind of labor. Personally, he figured he wouldn't have lasted two hours.

Boys and youths ran back and forth, up and down the rows, wearing yokes across their shoulders so they could carry two large water buckets. As they reached each worker in their assigned rows, they would stop, scoop up a dipperful of water, and hold it out to the man chopping the cane.

Jack scanned the rows of workers, trying to see whether any of the choppers, water boys, or cane bundlers looked anything like Ayisha, but he knew his chances of seeing Shabako, if he was even present here, and not at the pressing mill or the place where the cane syrup was boiled down, were dim. He was tempted to glance back at Tarek, but he didn't want to interrupt the big eunuch's concentration, knowing he was scanning the rows, worker by worker, looking for a face he hadn't seen for four years.

Instead Jack glanced past the field, to where a grove of trees stood beside a rutted cart track. The ground sloped downward in that area. Jack glanced upward at the position of the sun, and verified that the cart track must lead down to the plantation's dock.

Luckily, St. John Fenwick seemed capable of going on about the cane business *ad infinitum*. Jack made sure to keep an expression of intent concentration plastered on his face, and he listened just enough to be able to throw in the occasional, "That's fascinating!" and "Then what happens?" whenever the plantation owner seemed to be slowing down. While they were standing there, he saw two men collapse, falling face down into the dirt beside their machetes. Each time, the overseer would motion to several of the workers

whose task it was to bundle the cane, and they would grab the limp body and carry it over to some shade, accompanied by one of the water boys. It was the water boy's responsibility to then douse the unconscious chopper with water, then give him dipperfuls to drink, until he was sufficiently recovered to return to work. Jack wondered how many of them never recovered from their swoon.

Just as Jack figured that they'd struck out on the cane-harvesting operation, and was getting ready to suggest following the carts to the cane-pressing area, he felt something bump against the fashionable red heel of his elegant, silver-buckled black—and rented—shoe. He tensed, and the nudge came again. Jack smiled at his host, and as Fenwick reached the end of a sentence, waved to get his attention. "Excuse me," he said. "I feel the need for a little libation here. This heat certainly does parch one, doesn't it?"

Turning to Tarek, Jack held out his hand, and the eunuch placed his flask in it. As he did so, he held up his fingers, moving them quickly, precisely, as Jack silently counted. Then the big man touched first one shoulder, then the other.

Fifteenth row. Jack puzzled for a moment over the meaning of the two shoulder-touches. He removed the top of the flask, and took several swallows, thinking. Tarek made the shoulder-gesture again, and this time Jack got it.

One of the water carriers in the fifteenth row is Shabako!

Jack nodded quickly, then turned to Fenwick. "Care for a drink?" He held out his flask.

"Thank you," Fenwick said. "It does make one thirsty to just watch them, doesn't it?"

Jack nodded, absently. "Could we walk around a bit?" he asked, casually. "See the operation a bit closer up?"

"Certainly, Baron," Fenwick agreed.

Jack didn't wait for his host, but started off, walking along the row of workers, counting silently. *One…two…*

three…four…

Ayisha sat in the small boat, her shawl pulled up so it shielded her head, gazing tensely at the fourth dock on the river. With her were Etienne de Ver and Lucius Featherstone, whom Jack had delegated to row her down the river. Once they'd reached the designated spot on the slow-moving water, the Frenchman and the Englishman had taken out fishing poles, and dropped their unbaited lines into the water, so they wouldn't attract undue attention.

"Miss Ayisha," de Ver said, in his strongly accented English, "here, you should have something to drink. The sun…he is very hot." He held out a canteen.

"Thank you, Etienne," she said, gratefully, and drank several gulps of the watered ale, then returned the canteen.

Without a word, de Ver then placed the canteen between himself and Featherstone. After a moment, Featherstone glanced over, as if just noticing its presence for the first time, then picked it up and drank. Then he capped it and placed it back on the seat between himself and the Frenchmen.

Etienne de Ver picked it up and made quite a show of wiping off the spout before he, too, drank.

If Ayisha hadn't been so intent on watching the Wickhaven dock, she would have rolled her eyes. As it was, she just sighed.

She'd listened to the stern instructions Jack had given both crewmen.

"Listen up, mates. I'm assigning you lads to row Miss Ayisha down the river. You will obey her orders, lads, without question. If all goes well, you'll be picking up the young man we've come here to find today, the African prince, Miss Ayisha's nephew. Remember, lads, Mr. Beckett sent us here to rescue this prince for the EITC. So no mistakes. Once Miss

Ayisha identifies him, you're to row him back here to the ship, and keep him hidden while you do it. Savvy?"

"Aye, Cap'n Sparrow," they'd chorused.

"Take a blanket with you, to hide the lad you'll be picking up. Also take pistols and cutlasses with you, so you can protect Miss Ayisha, should that prove necessary, lads. Which I don't think it will, but that's why I picked you two. Because you're both trained soldiers."

Both crewmen, Ayisha noticed, stood a bit taller, hearing the captain's words.

"You don't want to draw attention to yourselves," Jack said. "Take fishing poles with you."

"Aye, Cap'n!"

Jack's voice had then fallen to a near whisper. "Lads, I'm counting on you to be…discreet. Do *not* discuss this mission, or anything you see while on it, with anyone. Ever. Savvy?"

"Aye, Cap'n!"

"Miss Ayisha…she's been in disguise this whole voyage, y'see," Jack had confided. "In order to effect this rescue, she'll need to remove her…mask. Don't ever discuss what you see when she does that. Savvy?"

"Aye, Cap'n!" Both sailors had given her a quick, sideways glance.

Jack had started to move away, then swung back, and lowered his voice once more, beckoning his men to move in close. "One more thing. If Miss Ayisha tells me that either of you subjects her to your tiresome, ridiculous *squabbling*"—his voice had dripped sarcasm—"while on this mission, I know two crewmen who will *not* be making the grade as 'able seamen' when the *Wench* returns to Calabar. *Are we **clear** on this, lads? Do you **savvy**?*"

"Aye Captain Sparrow!" they chorused, with equal fervor.

Thinking of that moment, Ayisha smiled slightly, despite her inner tension and the need for unceasing watchfulness.

From the moment she'd climbed into the dinghy, neither crewman had addressed so much as a word to each other.

For the hundredth time that afternoon, Ayisha tugged her shawl around her to hide her movements from her companions, then she reached into the bodice of her dress and withdrew Tia Dalma's compass. Quickly, she flipped it open and glanced down at the needle. It pointed steadily at the Wickhaven dock, as it had every time before.

Then, just as she was about to close the compass and put it back in the bosom of her dress, she paused, her attention riveted.

It was a tiny motion, scarcely discernible. She narrowed her eyes to make sure she was actually seeing it.

She *was* seeing it. Ever so slightly, the compass needle was quivering.

Thirteen…fourteen…fifteen…

Jack stopped at the head of the fifteenth row, watching the water carrier trotting back from the water barrels, balancing his sloshing buckets. As the lad trotted past him, he could see his features, and—yes. He could see the family resemblance. *That's Shabako.*

He waited, standing there patiently, knowing that Tarek must be signaling Chamba, as they had arranged previously. Jack took a deep breath, as he waited for the next act of their little comedy. Or was it a drama? He couldn't decide.

As he stood there, Jack heard the sound he'd been expecting. Chamba gave a low moan. The white silk parasol came tumbling down, bouncing onto the dirt of the cane field, then lying there. Tarek cried out, a soft, wordless exclamation.

Jack swung around, to see Chamba lying limply on the ground. "What happened?"

Tarek babbled at him in pidgin, as he knelt beside the younger man, slapping his cheeks, trying to bring him

around. Chamba, of course, did not respond.

Jack sighed theatrically, and picked up the parasol. He grimaced as he brushed dirt off it. “Lud, look at that, I’ll have to have it cleaned,” he commented. Then, looking down at Chamba, he shook his head, annoyed. “Fainted from the heat,” he said, to Fenwick. “What a nuisance.”

Fenwick nodded silent agreement.

Just then, Shabako trotted toward row fifteen, carrying fresh buckets of water. Jack gestured at the youth. “You there! Water boy! Over here!”

Obedient to the command of a white man, the young pharaoh turned and trotted toward him. With a rush of excitement, Jack noticed the battered strip of rawhide circling the youth’s wrist.

Tarek was kneeling beside Chamba, speaking again in pidgin. Jack knew what he was saying, even though he didn’t understand the words.

“Tarek,” Jack ordered, “you and this water boy, carry Chamba there, where those trees give some shade.” He pointed to the trees at the edge of the cart track leading down to the dock. “Keep him out of this sun, and give him water.”

Tarek nodded obediently.

“I’m going to continue my tour with Mr. Fenwick,” Jack added. “If Chamba comes to, you two meet me back in the carriage yard, by the barouche. I won’t be terribly long.”

Tarek asked him a question in pidgin. “Well, if he doesn’t come to, carry him back to my father’s plantation, and tell Mr. Montgomery I sent you. Tobias probably has someone that can help you see to him. It’s possible he’ll need bleeding, I suppose.”

Tarek inclined his head in a minimal bow, indicating he would follow his master’s orders.

Jack headed off with Fenwick. Together, they followed the loaded carts toward the cane-pressing equipment. With one part of his mind, he listed to Fenwick’s explanation

about how the sugarcane juice was treated once it was squeezed from the pieces of cane by the giant press, but mostly he was conscious of the moments going by. In his mind's eye, Jack could picture what was happening….

In a few minutes, Shabako and Tarek would reach the shelter of the trees beside the cart track leading down to the river. In their shade, they'd gently put Chamba down, as close to the woods as they could, while still remaining in sight. If Shabako hadn't already recognized Tarek, dressed as he was as a liveried servant, Tarek would then speak to the young pharaoh in their native language, explaining that he and Chamba had come there, with his sister, to free him.

Making sure that no one was watching them, Chamba and Shabako would move closer and closer to the woods, until they could slip out of sight behind the trees, leaving Tarek in sight of the cane field. When no one could see them, Chamba would change clothes with Shabako. The two youths were close to each other in height, they were about the same age, and they were both lean—though Shabako was much thinner. Jack had been able to count his ribs as the young pharaoh had approached them.

As soon as Shabako was wearing Chamba's livery, the young pharaoh would head down to the river, to rendezvous with his sister. Then, with Shabako hidden in the bottom of the dinghy, de Ver and Featherstone would row back to the *Wicked Wench* as rapidly as they could. Ayisha and Robby would then conceal the young pharaoh aboard the *Wench*, just in case there was a hue and cry.

But Jack was pretty sure that nobody at Wickhaven would notice that Shabako was gone. Not until tomorrow night, at least.

That was because Chamba was going to put on Shabako's discarded slave-rags, pick up his yoke with the water buckets, and then go back to work in the fields, carrying water to the cane choppers.

Tarek had explained to Jack that most slave owners, or even the overseers, couldn't tell one black face from another. His fellow *slaves* might realize that Chamba wasn't Shabako, but the lad planned to keep his distance from them. When the workers headed back to the slave compound near sunset, he'd mumble something in pidgin about having cramps in his gut, then head off to the public midden in the slave compound. Chamba would stay away from the other slaves, playing sick, until sunset, then line up with the others for the overseer's head count. As long as the overseer counted the right number of slaves before darkness fell, no alarm would be raised.

In the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, Chamba would sneak out of the compound, and head down to the river—where Jack, Robby, and an armed contingent of Jack's most capable fighters would be waiting in a longboat, just in case anyone followed him and raised the alarm.

Jack told himself that Chamba would surely be able to escape. No fence could keep that agile lad inside the compound—even presuming there was a fence. He made a mental note to ask Shabako as soon as he arrived back at the ship.

If Chamba didn't show up, Jack was fully prepared to lead his party to the slave compound, if that's what it took. He was only too aware of the loyalty his crewman had shown him by agreeing to become a slave again for one more night. He would *not* leave him behind—he had given Chamba his word.

Jack listened to Fenwick, counting the minutes until he could thank his host for the tour, give Fenwick's hand a hearty shake, then go back to the stables and climb into his rented barouche. After his experience with Caesar, Jack had gotten Tarek to show him how to drive this morning, before they'd set off along the plantation road. He felt fairly confident that he could drive the barouche for as long as it

took to reach Tarek, who would be waiting for him, near the road, once he was out of sight of Wickhaven.

Taking a deep breath, Jack told himself to relax, that his plan was sound. He'd get back to Viviana, return the barouche and team, then take back the rented clothing and this cursed wig. Well before dawn, the *Wicked Wench* would turn her stern to the Viviana port…and Jack Sparrow would have two of the three bracelets necessary to get into the labyrinth.

Jack smiled faintly. *Two down, one to go. You're going to be very surprised when I come calling, Christophe….*

Ayisha shaded her eyes from the sun, then glanced back down at the needle of the Jack's compass. It was still quivering.

When she looked up again, she saw a slender figure, clothed in servant's livery, emerge from the woods beside the cart track, then walk out onto the dock.

Turning to de Ver and Featherstone, she said quietly, through the constriction in her throat, "There he is. Row for the dock, please."

Quickly they stowed their fishing poles beneath the seats, then began rowing. The dinghy headed for the dock, where the liveried figure stood uncertainly, glancing back at the track, as though fearing pursuit.

Ayisha pulled her shawl over her head, then, remembering Jack's nonsense about her wearing a "mask," she moved around a little, as though some struggle was going on beneath the gray fabric. Ducking her chin against her chest, she quickly yanked the shawl down, shoving it beneath the opposite seat, so she would not inadvertently touch it.

With part of her mind, she heard the two sailors gasp as they took in her changed appearance, but Ayisha didn't look around. Her eyes were fixed on the figure waiting on the

dock. The dinghy was moving swiftly—now she could make out her brother's features, his dear, familiar face, though older, thinner, fined down to sharp planes and adult angles by the lonely years, the suffering, and near-starvation. As the boat neared the dock, she waved, and saw Shabako recognize her. His teeth flashed in a white, ecstatic grin.

The boat bumped against the dock, and de Ver and Featherstone steadied it. Ayisha scrambled out, onto the dock, and then—Apedemak be praised!—her arms were wrapped tightly around her brother. They clung to each other, rocking back and forth a little, not daring to speak, clinging to each other like two shipwrecked sailors grasping the fragile safety of a broken spar.

Shabako was trying to hold back his sobs. Ayisha wiped her own tears from her eyes, and whispered, "Shabako, my dear one. Listen carefully. Get into the boat, and lie down, with your head between the seats, and your legs extended beneath the empty seat. We will cover you with a blanket, so you won't be seen until we can get you aboard the ship. Before dawn we'll be sailing away from here. You'll be free."

He nodded, then did as she bade, climbing down into the dinghy, then stretching out. The two crewmen covered him up. Featherstone extended a hand to help her step down onto the seat.

She settled down, arranging her skirts, and smiled at the two crewmen. "Thank you," she whispered. "Now…back to the ship."

They bobbed their heads at her in acknowledgment, then bent to the oars. The boat seemed to leap through the water like a startled horse.

Ayisha turned back once, to see the empty dock, now growing smaller by the moment. Then she faced forward again. Against her bare foot, she felt the roughness of the blanket, and then the warmth of her brother's living body. She drew a long, contented breath, and offered up a silent prayer of thanks to her god.

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Chapter Thirteen
“Red Flag…Ho!”

The ***Wicked Wench*** sailed from the port of Viviana just as the eastern horizon began to lighten, heading north, past New Providence and its port of Nassau. Jack knew his crew assumed they were following the Triangle, but they weren’t—the heading he gave his helmsman was the one Tia Dalma’s compass indicated. Christophe was somewhere to the north, and that was where Jack was going.

Jack was eager to find his erstwhile friend so he could persuade him to sail east to Kerma. His plans were hazy from the point where he located Christophe, but they inevitably involved figuring out a way to get the third bracelet back from the French rogue. After all, Pharaoh Taharka had given it to Jack, not Christophe, right? Once Jack had all three bracelets, he’d get into the labyrinth and find the treasure himself. Whether or not Christophe survived the transfer of the third bracelet depended on Jack’s mood at the moment.

Chamba hadn’t needed his shipmates’ help to escape from St. John Fenwick’s slave compound. The lad had appeared down at the Wickhaven dock to meet Jack’s boat before midnight, and they’d spirited him away as planned. Jack resolved to give Chamba a liberal reward for his part in rescuing young Shabako, just as soon as he got his hands on the fabled treasure.

He was extremely pleased that Shabako’s rescue had proceeded so smoothly and successfully, and not just because he now had access to the second bracelet. Increasing his bargaining power with Christophe was

important, yes, but Jack was also mindful of how happy Ayisha was to have found her brother. From a woman who had never smiled when Jack had first encountered her, she had scarcely stopped smiling since they'd rescued the young pharaoh.

They continued to anchor out at night, so it took the *Wicked Wench* another two days of sailing north for Jack to sight the island of New Providence in his spyglass, still some distance away. He went up to the quarterdeck to double-check that the helmsman on watch knew to keep that pirate-controlled island off their starboard bow. A deep water channel running north-south lay to the west of the island, and Jack smiled as he saw the color of the water change beneath the *Wench*'s keel, darkening as they sailed into the channel.

After days of having to keep lookouts posted to watch for shoals, plus repeatedly checking the depth of the water, he was finally able to relax his vigilance. Many captains wouldn't have chanced sailing through the heart of the Bahamas, but Jack *knew* these waters…he'd sailed them for years, as man and boy.

With his ship safely in the deepwater channel, Jack decided it was finally safe to take a few hours off to celebrate the success of their mission.

Accordingly, just before seven bells of the forenoon watch, Jack and Robby left Frank Connery on duty as officer of the watch. Leaving Robby to collect people and escort them to his cabin, Jack prepared to host the guests he'd invited. He set out some of his precious supplies of fresh bread, purchased in Viviana, as well as fresh fruit and some of his best cheese and smoked meat. After due consideration, he set out not one but *two* bottles of good wine.

A few minutes later, Robby knocked on the door of Jack's cabin, and Jack ushered in his guests: Robby, Chamba, and the three Zerzurans. This time, Robby and

Chamba shared the floor, while Jack and Tarek sat on the bunk, and Ayisha and her brother took the chairs.

People passed around the food, talking and smiling, as Jack filled his motley assortment of cups with wine. Upon reflection, the captain decided that this was an occasion that merited his favorite drink, so he filled his own tankard with his best rum, savoring the heady fumes. Mindful of the fact that he would be going back on duty before too long, he served himself a plate of food and sat munching it.

As the group refilled their cups, there was a lot of laughter and recounting of experiences from the day of the rescue. Jack's description of his notable dinner at Wickhaven, especially when he regaled the group with his inspired description of his prowess as the most notable rider to hounds in all of England made everyone chuckle—but Ayisha, who knew the actual derivation of his imaginary hunter, Caesar, laughed until she was breathless.

Jack watched her laugh, enjoying the sound of it. It still fascinated him, how animated and lovely her real features were, as opposed to the illusion she'd woven so well. The afternoon sun glinted off her gold earrings that swung back and forth, brushing the dark skin of her throat. Idly, Jack imagined lifting the nearest gold disk and kissing her there, then feeling her pulse leap. He took another swig of rum, and sighed contentedly. Truly a moment to savor, he decided. Here he was, captain of a fine vessel like the *Wicked Wench*, with good rum to drink, enjoying a lovely woman's smile, with the promise of treasure soon to come. What could be better?

You're thinking more and more like a pirate, Jacky boy, the little voice mocked in the back of his mind. *Obsessed with rum, wenches, and treasure.*

So what if I think like a pirate, Teague? Jack replied to that part of himself. *I'm Captain Jack Sparrow, mate, and if I want to think about—or lust after—lovely wenches—excuse*

me, that should be lovely princesses—and treasure, too, ***so bloody what****?*

"Teague" fell silent.

Jack took another swig of rum, grinning and listening as Tarek, in his halting English, rose and described, with gestures, how "Frederick" had fussed about the dirt on the white silk parasol, before he'd ever bothered to look down at the "swooning" Chamba lying sprawled at his feet, eyes rolled back into his head. The big eunuch revealed a hitherto unexpected talent; he mimicked Jack so well that the captain laughed harder than anyone.

When it comes right down to it, piracy isn't a bad life, Jack thought, watching as Ayisha mock-fussed at her brother to eat more, picking grapes off a bunch, putting them on his battered pewter plate, then slicing him another hunk of cheese. *A short life, all too often, but nothing's perfect. When you're a pirate, you're master of your own fate. Pirates have more freedom than just about anyone else. Look at the Cutler Becketts of the world. Always scheming, trying to make everyone do everything their way. Determined to hem you in, pin you down, make you toil and scrape and sweat for every bloody farthing.*

Jack abandoned his mental back-and-forth when the young pharaoh stood up, and the group fell silent. Jack took another gulp of rum.

Shabako cleared his throat, then said, in good English, "As you know, I am Shabako, brother to Princess Amenirdis." He smiled at his sister. "She has told me of your search for me, how everyone present worked together to plan my rescue. You traveled far, you searched for weeks, you located me, then you risked much to free me. Each of you has demonstrated notable wit and courage."

The young man paused, then he straightened, his expression altering, becoming grave and formal. Despite the motley assortment of slop-chest garments he wore, he appeared taller, stronger, and full of power. Shabako gazed

regally at Chamba, Robby, and finally Jack, in turn, and, perhaps for the first time in his young life, he deliberately employed the royal “We.”

“Be assured,” he said, his tones deepening, “that We are speaking as the Horus, Lord of the Two Lands, Hemef of Kerma, Ruler of the Shining City. Please accept Our gratitude, Chamba, Robby Greene, and Jack Sparrow.”

“*Captain* Jack Sparrow,” Jack corrected, before he could stop himself. Then, as Ayisha glared at him, he gulped and added, “Excuse me, Your Majesty.”

Shabako gave him an imperial nod, and continued. “When this vessel reaches Our homeland of Kerma, We shall be able to make Our thanks more tangible, but until that time, know that you may call upon Us in any way, should you need help during this voyage. Thank you.”

With a nod, the youthful pharaoh sat back down.

Well-spoken lad, Jack thought, exchanging a glance with Robby and Chamba.

Minutes later, the impromptu party broke up, with the participants returning to their regular tasks. Jack saw Robby yawn as he left the cabin, and guessed he might be heading for his tiny cabin to rest up before his next watch.

Swallowing the last drops of his rum, Jack straightened his neckcloth and put his coat back on. He hid his good rum in its hiding place next to the head.

After grabbing his spyglass, he opened the door to the cabin. Spotting the cabin boy, Sam Hopkins, Jack called him over, then left him to clean up after the festivities. Heading out onto the weather deck, he sauntered around, enjoying the sea breeze as it cooled his rum-flushed cheeks. He was, he realized, more than a bit tipsy. *Not really drunk*, he thought, somewhat defensively. *Certainly not half seas over, or three sheets in the wind…nothing like that! Well, maybe one sheet,* he thought, repressing the urge to giggle. *At most, two….*

Clearing his throat, Jack made himself focus on the business at hand. Automatically, he checked the sailing conditions. Licking his finger, he held it up, scanning the waves. The seas were mostly calm, with the wind coming east-northeast at a steady eight knots. A glance at the sun told him it wasn't much past noon. Any moment now, he'd hear the bells sound, and then he'd know whether it was one or two bells of the afternoon watch. While he'd been entertaining, some cloud cover had moved in; some of the sky was now pale blue, due to some thin clouds gathering in the west. The rest of the sky was deeper blue, spotted with fair-weather cumulus.

Taking out his spyglass, Jack scanned the northern horizon for the southwest point of Great Abaco Island. When he sighted it, it would be time for the *Wench* to change course so they could enter the Northwest Providence Channel. This deepwater channel would take them safely between Great Abaco Island to starboard and the Berry Islands on the port side, avoiding the dangerous shoals. Jack resolved to post an extra lookout up on the main crosstrees to keep watch for any approaching vessels or shoal water. He'd sailed the Northwest Providence Channel many times and had the shoals and deep water marked on his charts, frequently in his own hand, but it didn't pay to be overconfident.

The Bahamas were notorious for shoal water. Many of the residents of these islands made their living as wreckers, salvaging ships that had run aground. Jack was glad to be approaching the channel in daylight; there were many tales of wreckers who had lured ships to their doom using lanterns rigged to look like beacons.

The *Wicked Wench* was making good time as she neared the channel. Jack went back to the railing, took out his spyglass and looked north. This time, he spotted the tip of Great Abaco. Time to change course. Accordingly, Jack headed over to Frank Connery, who still had the deck as

officer of the watch. “Mr. Connery,” Jack said, “please prepare the ship to take the Northwest Providence Channel.”

Connery nodded. “Aye, Captain Sparrow.” Then he bellowed, “Hands to the braces! Trim the ship!” Striding over to the ladder leading up to the quarterdeck, he addressed the helmsman on duty, Lee Trafford. “Mr. Trafford! New course, northwest by north.”

“Aye, Mr. Connery!”

After watching the crew handle the lines from the deck, paying out on some lines, heaving taut on others, then belaying to finish, Jack went up to the quarterdeck to check their new course on the binnacle. Afterward he nodded approvingly at the helmsman. “Hole in the Wall is due north of us,” Jack said, referring to a distinctive “keyhole” landmark in the rocky cliffs running along the southern coast of Great Abaco Island. “Ever see it before, Mr. Trafford?”

“I did, once, sir,” Trafford said. “My captain on that voyage wasn’t happy that we could actually spot it naked eye, since it meant we were too close to shoal water.”

“Left it too long to change the heading, did he?” Jack shook his head and clucked his tongue reprovingly, watching Trafford hold his ship on their new course. “Did you run aground?”

“By the mercy of Our Lord, Cap’n, we didn’t. But we were sweating for a few minutes.”

Jack stayed up on the quarterdeck for a while, then wandered back down to the weather deck to check the trim of the sails. Connery had done his usual competent job. For a moment he considered fetching his cutlass and getting in some sword practice, but he could still feel the effects of the rum, so perhaps that wasn’t the best idea.

Jack wandered across the weather deck, heading forward, then went up the few steps of the ladder leading to the bow. He stood leaning against the starboard rail, looking

across the water to Great Abaco Island, which lay about two leagues off. Idly, he took out his compass and flipped open the cover, then closed his eyes, thinking of Christophe and how much he needed to find him. When he opened his eyes, the needle pointed north. *It won't be long now, Christophe*, Jack thought, as he stowed the compass back in its hiding place.

Two bells of the afternoon watch sounded. Even though he stood in the shade of one of the jibs, the sun's heat was still strong enough to make him drowsy, what with not having had enough sleep, and the lingering effects of the rum. Jack blinked, then blinked again. His eyelids grew heavy. They'd been running up the channel now for about thirty minutes. He looked aft, at the doors to his cabin, thinking of how good it would feel to take off his coat and shoes and just lie down on his bunk for a little while. He yawned, then yawned again, so widely this time he could hear his jaw crack.

Come on, mate, he thought, *what's the good of being captain, if you can't take a ruddy nap once in a while?* Heading back down the short ladder to the weather deck, Jack found Connery again. "Frank, everything looks good," he said. "I'm going to catch a few winks while I can. Have someone wake me at the change of the watch."

"Aye, Captain Sparrow," Connery said, nodding.

"Oh…and post an extra lookout on the main crosstrees, Mr. Connery."

"Good idea, sir."

Jack headed into his cabin, which was neat and tidy again, thanks to the ministrations of the cabin boy. Taking off his neckcloth, coat, and waistcoat, he kicked off his shoes, then flopped down on the bunk, and closed his eyes….

Someone was knocking on the door of his cabin. "Captain Sparrow!" came the voice of Sam Hopkins.

Jack swung off the bunk, and opened the door. “Mr. Connery’s compliments, sir, and he said you ordered him to call you when the watch changed.”

“Very good, thank you,” Jack said. “I’ll be up directly.”

Still groggy with heat and sleep, he stumbled into the head and availed himself of the facility. Then he fetched a canteen filled with water. Bending over the hole, he sloshed the tepid liquid over the back of his neck, then splashed several handfuls onto his face, sputtering a bit. The water helped wake him up. He combed his hair, tied it back, then pulled his clothes and shoes back on. The couple of hours of sleep had refreshed him, and the effects of the rum were long gone.

Grabbing his tricorne and his spyglass, he headed out onto the weather deck. Almost immediately he spotted Robby, now officer of the watch, coming down the ladder from the quarterdeck. “How’re you doing?” Jack asked, knuckling something grainy from the corner of his right eye.

Robby smiled, taking in the gesture, as well as Jack’s freshly combed hair and still-damp face. “Better. I took a nap too,” he confessed, with a grin. “We’re getting too old for all this riotous living and late night high jinks, Jack.”

Jack grinned back. “Speak for yourself, lad. I’m always keen for a bit of a riot.”

Donning his tricorne, he straightened, his voice going more formal. “Report, Mr. Greene?”

“I just checked our heading, Captain, and we’re proceeding on course. We’ve maintained a steady six knots, and we’re currently between twelve and fourteen miles into the Northwest Providence Channel. My estimate, judging by the traverse log, says we’re about three leagues south of Sandy Point on Great Abaco.”

“Very good, Mr. Greene. Continue on present course,” Jack said.

He headed over to the starboard rail to peer through his spyglass, but all he could make out of Great Abaco was a

smudge on the eastern horizon. Jack wondered where Ayisha was, and what she was doing. Probably talking with her brother, catching Shabako up on—

"Sail ho! Sloop three points off the lee bow!" rang the voice of the lookout from overhead.

Jack snapped to attention. *A sloop? A* ***sloop****?*

Striding fast up to the port bow, he scanned the area in question with his spyglass, but he couldn't spot the vessel from the deck, not yet. *It's probably just an honest merchantman*, he thought, trying to reassure himself. *No point in getting the wind up yet.*

Heading back down the ladder, Jack looked up at the main crosstrees, where the extra lookout, an experienced able seaman by the name of Dan O'Shaughnessy, was stationed. Should he go up himself to get a look? Or wait? Cupping his hands around his mouth, Jack yelled up to the Irishman, "How far off do you make her to be?"

"Seven, maybe eight miles, Cap'n!" the answer came back.

Jack frowned, calculating. By the time he climbed up to where the lookout was, it would only be a few more minutes before the sloop would be viewable by spyglass from the elevation of the quarterdeck. He decided to check their position instead, so he hastened across the deck, then took the ladder steps two at a time. Quickly he checked their compass heading, then the traverse board, and did a quick mental calculation. He nodded. Robby's estimate as to their position had been right.

Robby joined him up on the quarterdeck, peering down into the binnacle, then turning to regard him. Jack tapped the traverse board, then nodded at the first mate, silently indicating his approval of Robby's estimate.

Roger Prescott, the helmsman now on watch, eyed him. "Trouble, Cap'n?"

"Too soon to tell," Jack said, absently, staring off to port. "It may be nothing. But…" He trailed off.

“This *is* the Caribbean, aye, sir,” Prescott finished for him. “The Spanish Main, they call it. Pirates on the prowl here.”

“Exactly,” Jack said. He and Robby exchanged a look. Then Robby headed back down the ladder to the weather deck.

Jack paced restlessly on the quarterdeck for the next fifteen minutes or so. Word of the sail being spotted must have been spreading because off-duty crewmen began gathering on the weather deck, gazing off to port.

Spotting the burly lee helmsman, William Banks, Jack called to him to come up the ladder to the quarterdeck. Spyglass in hand, Jack pointed to the high, solid railing at the rear of the quarterdeck. “I’m going to climb up to the edge of the taffrail for a better look,” he said. “A boost, if you please, Mr. Banks.”

“Aye, Cap’n!” Banks cupped his hands. Jack lifted his left foot, much as he would have to mount a horse, and stepped into the impromptu “stirrup.” He sprang upward, and Banks lifted. Moments later the captain was up another seven feet, bracing himself against the portside stern lantern, focusing his spyglass off to port.

The sloop was there, in the channel, and he could see her, now that she was closer, only five or six miles away. She was moving faster than the cargo-laden *Wicked Wench*, and if she held to her current course and speed, she would intersect the *Wench* in thirty or forty minutes.

Jack squinted, adjusting the focus of his spyglass to get the sharpest view. *A Bermuda-rigged sloop…*

He lowered his spyglass, gnawing at his lower lip. *If only this wasn’t a bloody sloop*, he thought, uneasily. Still, there were hundreds of sloops sailing around the Caribbean. Some undoubtedly were pirate ships, while others were merchantmen.

But there was only *one* rogue pirate who preferred sloops, and he flew a red flag, emblazoned with a horned

demon’s skull.

Jack didn’t recognize this particular sloop, but that was no comfort. Vessels plying the waters of the Caribbean were at risk from shipworm, a type of worm that could literally eat holes in a ship’s hull. It had been five years since he’d seen *Koldunya*. Borya might well have replaced the sloop he’d had five years ago with a newer one.

Jack raised the spyglass again, but the ship was too far away to make out any details. He couldn’t see any spot of red that might be a flag.

“Bugger,” he muttered under his breath. “Bugger, bugger, bugger!”

Well, there was one way to find out whether the sloop was a pirate or a merchant ship. Jack went back to the edge of the high railing and sat down, legs dangling, then bent over to hand Banks his spyglass. When he slid down, Banks caught his arm, steadying him as he landed.

“Helm to port,” Jack ordered Prescott. “Heading due west. Let’s be very gentlemanly and pass astern of her. I want plenty of water between us, Roger.”

Prescott nodded. “Aye, Cap’n.” He turned the wheel, and the *Wicked Wench*’s bow swung to port.

Jack called down the course change to Robby and saw the crew beginning to make the necessary adjustments to the sails. Jack, Banks, and Prescott watched tensely for the next few minutes, waiting to see what the sloop would do.

Thinking he saw movement from the sloop, Jack trained his spyglass on her again. He was right. She was altering course. He watched her as she turned, until he could see her full starboard side. She was definitely “wearing,” changing course by turning her bow away from the wind. It was a useful way to turn a vessel without tacking. As the sloop continued to change course, her sails nearly disappeared—Jack knew he was seeing them edge on. Then the sails reappeared as the sloop completed its full turn. Once more, she was aimed to intersect the *Wicked Wench*.

"*Bugger*!" Jack whispered again, under his breath. The one word didn't seem adequate to relieve his feelings, so he said a few others, in three or four different languages, but he kept his voice down. After seeing the way Bainbridge had yelled, cursed, and raved, Jack was determined to maintain proper decorum.

At this point, there could be no further doubt; the sloop was a pirate vessel, and the *Wicked Wench* was her intended prey. Jack thought for a minute, picturing their current location in his mind. He knew these waters….

Jack beckoned to Robby to join him on the quarterdeck. "Mr. Greene, new course, due north. Keep her hard on the wind, not an inch to leeward."

Robby's expression was grim. "Aye, Cap'n!" He hesitated for a moment, glancing back at Banks, but the lee helmsman was on the other side of the quarterdeck. "Jack," he said, softly, "do you think it's *him*?"

"I think we'll find out before long, Robby," Jack said. "But for what it's worth…" He trailed off and nodded. "Yes, I do."

"God help us," Robby whispered. Beneath his tan, he was pale. "He was the only man Captain de Rapièr ever feared."

"He's human," Jack said. "It's not like he's some kind of bloody demon. And we're aboard the *Wench*, Robby. She's a good ship. She's quick to the hand, and she has teeth."

Jack glanced to port, then back at his first mate—his friend. "Robby, we can fight, and we will. We may lose, we may go down, but if we do, by Neptune's beard, that Russian son of a bitch will know he's been in a scrap."

Robby nodded. Jack could see that he was trying to stay impassive, but he knew him too well to miss the fear in his eyes.

"Don't forget, I know these waters, Robby. I'm wagering I know them better than Borya does. I've got an idea how to get him. You're a praying man. Pray it works. Pray *hard*."

“I will, Jack.”

Jack smiled and clapped Robby on the shoulder. “I believe I gave you an order, Mr. Greene?”

“Aye, Cap’n,” Robby said. He tried to smile, then turned away.

Jack heard him giving orders, and felt the *Wench* turn again, swinging back to starboard, heading due north. He headed down the ladder, then turned and went into his cabin. All his charts had been put away to make room for the little gathering earlier, but a quick search produced the right one. Jack lifted it, and with an expert snap of his wrist, sent it unrolling across his table. He bent over it, studying it. He’d ordered the course change based on memory; now it was time to check and double-check what lay to the north.

After looking again at the chart, Jack went back to the quarterdeck, moving fast, to examine the traverse board, where all the *Wench*’s positions, as determined by the chip log, were recorded, using pegs to mark their progress. Quickly he checked them, then, holding the figures in his mind, he ran back down the ladder, back to the chart. Muttering the numbers, he hastily grabbed a quill and some ink, then scratched them onto a scrap of parchment. Then he went back over the chart again.

Finally Jack sagged into his chair, and absently capped his bottle of ink. He was sure of their position now. The *Wicked Wench* was not quite twenty miles from an uncharted deepwater inlet, a trough in the coral reef about one mile wide and three miles long. The inlet dead-ended just east of the northernmost tip of a little island called Gorda Cay. If the *Wicked Wench* continued due north on her current course, all Jack had to do was turn just little bit to the northeast, and his ship would sail right into the inlet—and Borya would follow him.

Jack knew where the trough began. He also knew where it abruptly dead-ended. He was betting Borya didn’t.

He knew his plan was risky. If he didn't time this maneuver just right, he and his crew would wind up trapped, sitting ducks. On the other hand, if he were successful, the pirate sloop would run aground, and the *Wench* would be free to come about and blast her to flinders with her twelve-pounders. A ship that couldn't move couldn't aim her cannons properly.

Jack took a deep breath and crossed his fingers. *All I need is good timing and a bit of luck.*

Time passed, seeming to crawl, as the two ships continued on their respective courses. As the afternoon lengthened, the pirate sloop gradually closed the distance between it and the *Wicked Wench*. Jack watched the gap between them narrow, checking the sloop through his spyglass as it drew closer and closer. When the sloop was barely two miles away, the pirate hoisted his colors.

It was almost anticlimactic for Jack to recognize the flag the sloop ran up as a rogue pirate's distinctive red ensign. On some level he'd known the pirate ship pursuing him was Borya Palachnik ever since the lookout had shouted his alert.

Jack handed Robby the spyglass. When Robby lowered the glass, he was pale, but resolute. Jack kept his voice flat. "Mr. Greene, call all hands."

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Robby shouted, "All hands on deck!" The ship's bell rang stridently.

By this time many of the crew had already gathered, nervously watching as the sloop paced them, drawing ever closer. The remaining hands arrived quickly.

Jack turned and climbed a few steps up from the weather deck, waiting for his men to gather. As soon as he was sure they were all there, watching him silently, he spoke, raising his voice so all could hear. "Lads, you're a good crew, none better. We're shipmates, so I'm going to be

honest with you. Lads, we're in a tight spot. That sloop over there"—he pointed—"is a rogue pirate, flying the red flag. She's after us, and we're going to have to fight."

Jack paused, hearing the mutter of anxious voices. He cleared his throat. Silence fell again. "I believe most of you have heard stories about how these rogue pirates treat the crews of vessels they capture. They slaughter them. No quarter, no mercy. Being captured is a death sentence. So, lads, we have no choice but to fight, and each of you must give his all. The *Wench* must *not* be captured. Savvy?"

Jack waited.

Robby, recognizing his cue, shouted, "No surrender! We *fight*!"

Slowly, a few voices at a time, the assembled crew picked up his words. "We fight! We fight! We *fight*!"

They chanted it, over and over, louder and louder, their voices rising and falling in unison, as their excitement grew. Soon the whole crew was pumping their fisted hands in the air, all of them shouting at the top of their lungs.

Jack nodded, then raised his own fist as they quieted, their faces turned up to hear him. "That's my brave lads, my shipmates! Today we fight! We'll fight like cornered bilge rats! We'll fight, and we'll *win*!"

His men cheered, and chanted again. "Fight! FIGHT! ***FIGHT***!"

"*Victory*!" yelled Jack. "VICTORY!"

The crew yelled with him, chanting for victory.

Jack looked over the assembled crew, and saw Ayisha, Tarek, and Shabako standing there, silent, beside Chamba, who was yelling and leaping up and down, as excited as his mates.

As the crew's shouts died away, Jack nodded at their flushed faces. "I knew I could count on you! I'm proud to serve with you! Now, all hands, stand by for orders."

He headed down the ladder, cleaving through the crowd of men, slapping backs, patting shoulders, flashing them a

wide, confident smile. It had to be some of the best acting he'd ever done.

When Jack reached the three Zerzurans, he said, curtly, "If Chamba hasn't explained, this is what's happening. We've got a rogue pirate closing in on us, and he's made his intention to attack us clear. The rogue pirates are the ones that give no quarter, savvy? That means they take no prisoners. If they capture us, we're all dead."

Ayisha gasped, and her brother put his arm around her. "The crew is going to be very busy," Jack continued. "Too busy to deal with passengers. So I want you three to head below, all the way below to the cargo hold."

Jack fixed Tarek with a stern glance. He'd been in the guards, surely he knew how to take orders. "Look over the cargo in the hold, and find someplace to hide there in the middle of the barrels. An empty spot, savvy? There's a good chance we'll take fire." At their uncomprehending looks, he amended, "They will probably shoot cannonballs at us. Hide in one of the clear spaces. The ship may bounce around. Barrels may topple. Just find the best place, and stay there."

He started to turn away, but Ayisha, her gray shawl held tightly around her, darted forward and grasped his arm. "Jack, isn't there anything, any way that I can help? I want to *help*!"

Jack looked over at Tarek and a glance of understanding flashed between them. Shaking his head, he smiled faintly. "Sorry, love, I'm afraid not. Unless you can arrange to blow up their powder magazine, the best thing you can do is to follow orders, go below, and *stay there*. Now go on, please."

Without waiting for any more arguments from her, Jack headed back to give his orders. Behind him, he could hear Ayisha protesting, then she let out an indignant squawk. Jack suspected that the giant eunuch had picked her up bodily, to carry her below.

Jack spent the next few minutes ordering Robby and Frank Connery to "anchor by the stern" on the *Wicked*

Wench's starboard side—the side away from Borya. Jack didn't want the rogue captain to see what they were doing.

Anchoring by the stern was a messy, arduous task, requiring the cooperation and strength of all available hands, but it would bring Jack the results he wanted—if all went according to plan.

Working together, under the supervision of the two mates, the crew would haul the thick, heavy anchor cable all the way from the bow on the main deck back to the stern, then pass it out of the aft-most gun port on the starboard side. Then, using ropes to keep the cable from falling into the sea, the crew would come up on the weather deck and haul the cable along the outside of the hull, all the way forward to the ship's bow, where they'd secure it to the "small bower" anchor—basically, the *Wench*'s spare anchor.

When Jack gave the order to drop anchor, the small bower would plummet down into the water, catch on the bottom, and bring the ship up short, stopping her dead, before she could run aground at the end of the trough. While the anchor was dropping and catching, the sail handlers would spill all wind from the sails to stall the ship's forward momentum.

Borya's sloop was slowly closing on their port side, so the Russian wouldn't be able to see what they were doing over on the starboard side.

Jack stood on the quarterdeck with his most experienced helmsman, Lemuel Matthews, on the wheel, and Chamba, who was on duty as the ordinary seaman, turning the hourglass and updating the traverse board. They were the only three who were exempt from the duty of hauling the anchor cable. Jack and Chamba stood side by side, watching as Connery and Robby gave the crew their instructions. The men went below to begin the operation.

Suddenly a muffled boom off to port made them swing around, only to see a puff of smoke clouding one of *Koldunya*'s starboard gun ports. Borya's sloop was now only

about a mile away, and he'd opened fire. He didn't have the range yet, and the shot fell harmlessly short. Jack watched the spout of water the ball splashed up.

For a moment Jack wished he had more men so he could shoot back, but he needed every available crewman to handle the heavy anchor cable. He shrugged. Let Borya waste ammunition. Jack planned to conserve his, because he knew the rogue was bound to have more powder and shot than he did.

Borya fired again, and again it fell short. The Russian continued to fire at intervals, trying to get the range, using his starboard cannons.

Jack ignored the shots. It was time to check his position again. Heading forward, he stood on the port side of the bow, spyglass ready. He had to stand far forward, because his crewman were back up on the weather deck as they completed hauling the cable forward to the bow so it could be secured to the small bower anchor.

His next landmark was Rocky Point on Great Abaco, a distinctive fishhook-shaped bit of land that lay only two miles east of their path north. He should be able to spot it easily—it was the easternmost land on Great Abaco.

It wasn't long before Jack saw the point approaching. He waited until they were opposite the tip of Rocky Point to use it as his mark, then he went back to the quarterdeck, checked the traverse board and the binnacle, and went back down to his cabin to check their position on his chart one last time.

When he returned to the quarterdeck, he nodded at Chamba and Matthews. "We're right on course, mates."

Robby Greene appeared, tired and grimy, to report that the anchor was rigged in accordance with Jack's orders. Jack directed him to oversee the sail handlers, and to have Second Mate Connery supervise the dropping of the anchor as soon as the captain gave the order. Between them, they

agreed on a visual signal to back up shouted orders, in case Borya fired just as Jack issued the orders.

Jack's landmark for actually entering the deepwater inlet was a sandbar that lay about two miles north of Rocky Point. At the *Wicked Wench*'s current speed, it would take them about fifteen more minutes to reach it. The sandbar was white, and it was low tide. It should be easily visible to the naked eye, off to starboard.

The three on the quarterdeck stood in silence as Borya continued to fire at them. The sloop was still closing, now less than a mile away, and, inevitably, a three pounder finally hit the *Wicked Wench*, smashing through the portside railing as though it wasn't there, then going over the starboard side, just missing the mainmast. Jack, Chamba, and Matthews looked at one another, but there was nothing to say.

When Jack judged they were drawing near the inlet, he sent Chamba forward to the bow with orders to signal the quarterdeck as soon as the ship drew even with the sandbar. The sails blocked Jack's and Matthews's view forward; they could only see off to port or starboard.

When Chamba was gone, Jack went over to the wheel. "I'll take her for a moment, Mr. Matthews. We're going to need to turn to starboard, but gradually, and not much."

"Aye, Cap'n."

As Jack slid his hands around the spokes of the big wheel, he wondered whether this would be the last time he'd steer his ship. The waiting was getting to him. He knew that once the action started, he'd steady down and focus; until then, his palms were slippery with sweat. But it wouldn't do to wipe them in front of Matthews.

Another shot plunked into the water not ten feet from the *Wicked Wench*'s port side, amidships. Jack's jaw tightened, but he remained focused, waiting for Chamba to appear.

Finally, he spotted the lad bounding across the weather deck, waving and pointing off to starboard. Jack waited a minute or two until he glimpsed the whiteness of the sandbank himself, then he turned the wheel very slightly, delicately.

Chamba came bounding up the ladder to the quarterdeck to resume his duties. Jack turned the wheel just a bit more. He couldn't turn them much to the east, or they'd lose their forward momentum as the sails began to luff.

The *Wicked Wench*'s bow drifted right a little, then a little more.

After another minute or two, Jack stole a glance to starboard, and saw they were almost past the sandbar, and heading straight. They were in the trough. The water on either side of the ship remained deep blue, but when he squinted, he could see the color of the sea change, grow lighter in the distance. Because of the clouds, and the length of the sun's rays in the west, it was difficult to make out the depth of the water, due to the reflection. It would probably take Borya a while before he realized that there were now shoals hemming him in on both sides of the trough.

Koldunya followed them into the trough. She was now about three-quarters of a mile away, behind them, still on their port side. The sloop's next shot came from her bow chaser, aimed at the *Wench*'s stern. It missed, plunking into the water, but the next one hit them. Jack didn't think it had struck below the waterline, but it was hard to tell.

Jack gave the wheel back to Matthews, and went forward, watching the water as it slid past the bow. He was sweating, but not due to the heat. He could see Gorda Cay without his spyglass, coming up to port. It wasn't a very big island—not even half a mile long.

They hadn't been in the deepwater trough long—perhaps five minutes. In fifteen more minutes, give or take,

the *Wench* would reach the end of the trough, and run into the shoal. Before that happened, Jack had to trick Borya into running aground. He knew just where he had to do it, and they were not there yet, but the waiting was torture.

Jack peered back at Borya's sloop. He knew the Russian captain must be itching to come up on his port side again so he could fire a broadside instead of just lobbing shots at them with the single bow chaser. *Koldunya* was barely half a mile away.

Ten more minutes crawled by, and finally—finally!—it was time for Jack to make his move. He raced up the ladder to the quarterdeck. *Koldunya* was right behind the *Wench* now, less than a thousand yards astern, still gaining steadily.

"Matthews, change course to northwest," Jack ordered. As the helmsman turned the wheel, Jack waved at Robby to stand by, indicating that he was about to issue those orders. Robby waved back, acknowledging the signal, then, in his turn, signaled Connery, who was standing ready to release the anchor.

The *Wicked Wench* swung to port.

As Jack had anticipated, Borya immediately did the same. The *Wench*'s turn closed the distance between them, and *Koldunya* was now only three hundred yards away—within broadside range.

Jack held his breath. Surely by now the Russian captain had noticed there were shoals on either side! But the sloop plunged ahead, doing exactly what Jack wanted. Borya's sloop had a much shallower draft than the *Wicked Wench*. The Little Butcher must have figured the *Wench* was following yet another deepwater channel.

Come on, run aground, run aground, run aground ***now****, come* ***on!*** Jack thought, balling his fists. Would Borya be able to hit the *Wench* with a broadside before his sloop hit the shoal? If he didn't hit it soon, the *Wench* would run aground! They were barely two hundred yards from the end of the inlet!

The sloop's bow suddenly thrust upward as she came to a crashing halt. Jack watched as her topmast snapped off and crashed to the deck.

Jack gasped with relief. It had worked! "YES!" he yelled. "*YES*!"

He heard his crew yelling in celebration. It was hard to tear his eyes away from the sight of the sloop, helplessly aground, but Jack turned, and waved to Robby. "Drop anchor!" he bellowed.

Robby signed to Connery, repeating the order, in case the second mate hadn't heard the captain over the cheering crewmen. Immediately Jack cupped his hands around his mouth, grabbed a breath, and yelled, "Let fly all sheets! Scandalize her!"

The "sheets" were the ropes that kept the sails taut, and "to scandalize" meant to spill all wind from the sails. Jack waited tensely as the crewmen worked feverishly to halt the ship.

Without warning, the *Wicked Wench*'s bow lifted, then she halted so abruptly Jack was flung into the air. The top of his head whacked the railing of the quarterdeck, and he nearly catapulted right down the ladder—but some instinct made him grab the railing just in time to save himself. Stars and pinwheels spiraled past his vision; he struggled against blacking out.

Moments later, Jack slowly sat up, then he climbed to his feet, shaking his head, still stunned from the fall. The sails hung loose, as ordered. He knew the anchor had been let go.

But the anchor wasn't what had stopped them. Not that fast, not that hard.

Jack realized the *Wicked Wench* had run aground, too. Looking over to port, Jack could see *Koldunya*, three hundred yards distant, her starboard side facing them.

The ships were within cannon range of each other. It wasn't particularly close range, but shots would be able to

reach.

Jack stumbled down the ladder, his steps dragging. He was having trouble focusing…his vision seemed blurred.

Now what? he wondered. He tried to think, to plan, but his head was still spinning from the fall. He felt sick as he realized that he'd failed.

Outsmarted yourself, Jacky Boy, didn't you?

Not even realizing that he was speaking aloud, Jack told Teague what he could do with himself.

"Jack?" a voice reached him. He turned to find Robby beside him, staring at him intently. "Jack, are you all right?"

"Yes," Jack said. He rubbed the top of his head, feeling a lump rising. "Nearly took a purler down the ladder. But I'm all right."

"You're staggering," Robby said, worriedly.

"I'll be fine," Jack said. His vision seemed to be clearing, and so was his thinking. "Robby, we need to order the port gun crew to open fire. All we can do now is hope to hit him before he pulls himself together enough to fire at us."

"Right, Jack," Robby said. Turning he darted off in the direction of the main deck.

Jack stood there, still unsteady on his feet. Heading over to the mainmast, he braced one hand against it. The westering sun touched his face, making him squint. *I've lost me bloody hat*, he thought, grumpily.

Then he spoke aloud, because the sound of his own voice seemed to anchor him to reality. "First thing, shoot Borya with cannon broadsides," he said. "Check. Second thing, ah, yes…assess how much damage we've sustained. Right."

Moving a bit more steadily, Jack headed across the weather deck to find Frank Connery. Suddenly the *Wicked Wench* lurched again, beneath his feet, and he heard the thunder of her cannons. Even from up here on the weather deck, the sound hit his ears with nearly physical force. Smoke stung his eyes, and he smelled burned powder.

The battle had begun.

When the ship lurched, Ayisha, Tarek, and Shabako all tumbled forward. But since they'd been sitting on the deck in the first place, they didn't have far to fall. The three Zerzurans picked themselves up and stood there, listening. The ship was still. Even the normal rocking motion had ceased.

"This isn't right," Ayisha said, nervously. "Something has happened. Something bad. I think I should go up and see what's going on."

"Captain Sparrow told us to stay right here," Shabako said. "As he pointed out, the crew needs to give all their attention to the ship. They can't take time to answer questions, or deal with us. We'll just have to wait."

"The Hemef is right," Tarek said. "We need to stay here."

The princess glared at her bodyguard. Her memory of how he'd carried her down here to the hold was still vivid, and embarrassing. She stroked her bracelet. "You know, I *might* be able to help," she pointed out. "Perhaps I could cast an illusion that would help the crew against the enemy vessel."

Tarek shook his head obdurately. "Captain Sparrow said…"

Ayisha took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. She wasn't sure what was impelling her to leave the hold, but it was strong. Her fingers crept to the scrap of fabric that was her wristlet, gently rubbing the raised bumps of the embroidery. All her instincts were telling her to leave the hold, to go up to the main deck and see what was happening. Was she just curious, or spoiled, accustomed to getting her way? Not after more than six months of slavery.

She wet her lips, eyeing Tarek, knowing he could—and would—physically stop her, unless she could convince him.

“Tarek, I have to go up there. There is something I have to do. I feel…” She turned to her brother. “Shabako, I *must* go. Please. Order Tarek to let me leave here.”

Her brother gazed at her, then his eyes fastened on her wristlet, which she was still rubbing. “Amenirdis, be honest with me. Do you feel that you are receiving some kind of… sacred command…to go?”

Ayisha bit her lip. She couldn’t lie to her brother. “I cannot be certain. But I think that my own wishes could not push me so strongly. I do feel some kind of…guidance…at work. This I swear to you, I, who have served as Apedemak’s handmaiden in his temple.”

Shabako nodded, then faced Tarek. “Tarek, I give my sister permission to go, and I ask you to go with her to guard her. This is my royal will.”

Tarek bowed his head. “As you say, so shall it be, Hemef,” he replied, using the term in their language for pharaoh. “But first, give me your word that *you* will remain here, in as much safety as possible, given our circumstances.”

Shabako nodded. “You have Our royal word,” he said, formally.

Ayisha stepped forward and hugged her brother. “I’ll come back as soon as I can,” she whispered.

Impatience quickened her steps as she headed for the ladder leading up from the cargo hold. Ayisha could feel something driving her onward. Was it simply curiosity? Or boredom and frustration from being shut up like a mouse in a barley bin? Or might it be her concern for Jack Sparrow, who had come to mean more to her than she could easily admit, even to herself ?

She didn’t know. Ayisha simply knew that what she was feeling was *real*. She had to leave the hold, find out what was happening, and see if there was some way she could help.

Just as she lifted her foot to place it on the next step of the ladder leading up to the main deck, the whole ship lurched, then shuddered again. Ayisha fell backward, off the ladder, and if Tarek hadn't been there to catch her, she would have fallen all the way back down.

Luckily, she knew almost immediately what the sound was, though it was much louder than she'd ever heard before. The *Wicked Wench* was firing her cannons. Grabbing the railing beside the ladder, Ayisha clung to it as she made her way back up the steps. Lifting the hatch, she peered out, seeing feet running back and forth. Another broadside rocked the ship, but this time she was hanging on.

She climbed up until she stood on the main deck. All the gunners and gun crews were gathered on the port side of the ship, working feverishly to swab out the barrels of the cannons so they could reload. The stench of burned powder stung her nose, and the smoke drifting back through the gun ports burned her eyes. Tarek climbed up and stood beside her, carefully lowering the hatch so it didn't bang down.

Ayisha stepped cautiously over until she could see through a gun port, trying to see what they were aiming at.

A ship lay across the water some distance from the *Wicked Wench*, almost directly parallel to her. As Ayisha watched, smoke bloomed from its gun ports. Tarek caught her, steadying her, as the *Wench* shuddered from the impact of several shots.

Moments passed, then the enemy gunners fired again, almost at the same exact moment as the guns on the *Wicked Wench* belched smoke and deadly shot. Again the ship shook. Its timbers creaked in protest.

If anyone had noticed her and Tarek, they were too busy to do anything about it. Ayisha held her finger to her lips, then pointed to their canvas-walled "cabin" on the other side of the vessel. The carpenters had added a new, separate section of canvas to serve as Shabako's quarters.

Quickly she ran across the deck, opened the door flap, and bolted inside, Tarek on her heels. Once they were there, she dared to speak softly. “The ships are not moving. I believe both have run aground. What will happen now?”

Tarek shook his head. “They will either shoot at each other until all their cannonballs are used up, or one of them will break free and sail over to loose their cannons at the other from such close range that the trapped ship will be utterly destroyed.”

Ayisha nodded. “Yes. And since the enemy ship is smaller and lighter, it seems likely that it will be the one to float free first. When we went below, it was low tide, or so Chamba told me. The tide must have turned by now.” She looked out their starboard gun port, which faced northeast. “I cannot see Ra, but his light seems low. I believe he will set within the hour.”

Their whispered conversation was interrupted every few seconds by the booming of the cannons. The sound was so loud that Ayisha wanted to clap her hands over her ears and scream, just to shut it out. She ordered herself to ignore the noise, difficult though that might be.

Tarek was watching her, his eyes intent on her face. “So?” he said. “There is nothing we can do about this, Your Highness.”

Ayisha took a deep breath. “Do you remember what Captain Sparrow said to me just before you carried me below?”

“I confess I was not paying much attention, Highness.”

“He said, ‘Unless you can blow up his powder magazine for me, you cannot help.’”

“I remember now.” Tarek looked at her skeptically. “You aren’t thinking that you….”

“I am,” she said, fiercely. “I believe I can. And I *will*. That is why I was summoned to come up here, so I could see all of this, and know what I could do.”

Tarek's eyes widened. "To work a transfer spell, so far from Zerzura? Highness, you cannot! Not even a High Priest could do that."

"I can," she said. "Or die trying. Now either help me, or get out of my way."

Tarek shrugged, helplessly. "The Hemef ordered me to guard you, Highness. I must do my duty."

"I release you from that duty. Go below. Guard my brother."

"No." Tarek looked her steadily in the eyes. "When you were twelve years old, Highness, I gave up my manhood when your father asked me to do so, so that I might guard his only daughter, the flower of his soul, the delight of his heart. I will not turn away from my duty now."

Ayisha gazed at him, reminding herself that she had no time for emotion. She swallowed, then nodded. "Very well. I would welcome your help…and your company."

Spreading out her shawl on her bunk, she began tossing things into it, bustling about their little enclosure. Tarek watched silently as she scrabbled through their meager possessions. A stub of a candle in its holder. A skein of coarse woolen thread. Her hand-loom. All of them landed in the middle of the old gray shawl.

Finally, he said, "Highness, you will need stillness and quiet to work transfer magic. The ship is bouncing and shuddering every minute or two, either from our guns, or the enemy's. How will you be able to concentrate enough to weave a transfer spell?"

"When the enemy ship breaks free of the land's hold, its crew will need to handle the sails and repair the damage from the battle. While they are doing that, I believe they will be too busy to shoot for a few minutes. That is when I will weave my spell."

Ayisha slung the improvised bag over her shoulder. "I will need to be in the open air, within sight of the enemy, in order to envision the transfer point for my spell. I believe I

know the perfect spot. But until the guns fall silent, we will wait nearby, in a safe place, where no one is likely to come."

"Where is that, Your Highness?"

"Jack's cabin," she said, with a faint smile. "He will be all over this ship. His own cabin will be the last place he would go."

Tarek nodded. "Then I will go with you."

He followed where his princess led.

Ayisha had indeed guessed truly when she'd said that Jack was "all over the ship." His legs were beginning to ache, he'd been up and down ladders so many times.

Damage control was going on, even as the *Wicked Wench* continued to pound *Koldunya*, only to be pounded in turn by the sloop's broadsides. Jack had little time to spare for thinking about the battle in the abstract, but if he had, he'd have agreed that it was one of the strangest he'd ever heard of. Two ships, trapped and motionless, lobbing broadside after broadside at each other was madness. By the time they floated free, both were likely to sink. There could be no "winner" from such an encounter.

As Jack hastened back and forth, up and down, checking on how Tench, the carpenter, was doing as he and Newton worked feverishly to patch holes and repair damage to the ship's essential structure, he was aware of several things:

First, the tide was coming in. At some point, the *Wicked Wench* might float free from the shoal on her own. But since she was a larger, heavier vessel with a deeper draft, it was far more likely that *Koldunya* would be the first vessel to break free. And when she did, Jack's ship and crew would be what he'd most feared—sitting ducks.

Secondly, it wouldn't be long before the *Wench*'s gunners ran out of ammunition. Merchant ships didn't have space or weight allowance for many cannonballs—his ship only carried sufficient cannonballs for each gun to fire

twenty-five shots. Jack knew that if he hadn't requested that extra powder from Cutler Beckett, he'd have run out by now.

And thirdly, if by some miracle he managed to get the *Wicked Wench* free of the shoal, and escape or defeat *Koldunya*, he still wouldn't have smooth sailing. His men had been through a lot already today. They were tired, and soon they'd be exhausted. Frank Connery had reported that the ship was taking on water, so Jack had assigned men to start working the bilge pumps in shifts. That was grueling labor, and he'd have to have fresh men to relieve them, and soon, but there were none to assign.

The two carpenters were patching holes as quickly as they could using cone-shaped wooden plugs made to fit the holes left by the various sizes of cannonballs, but they didn't have an indefinite supply of those, either.

Soon the sun would set. Not that that was likely to affect *Koldunya*'s barrage of fire. Jack figured the *Wench*'s ammunition and powder would last until sunset. Borya's supply, he was sure, would last a lot longer than that.

Jack trotted up the ladder from the main deck, to be met by Chamba. He'd had the lad running errands for him, serving as a messenger between him and his mates. "Cap'n," Chamba said, "I be just comin' to find you. I be checking all the ship's boats, like you said." He grimaced.

"Bad news?" Jack braced himself.

"Cap'n, we got one little boat, the dinghy, it look like it can be fixed pretty easy. And we got one longboat, no damage. All the others…" he shook his head. "Smashed, Cap'n. Some of 'em hardly more than splinters."

"Great," Jack said. He hadn't expected anything else, but it was still a bitter blow. They couldn't even abandon ship. However, with one longboat still intact, they might be able to kedge the *Wench* off the shoal, using the anchor, dragging it along using the boat, then seating it securely behind them in the deepwater channel, and then having

men turn the capstan to winch the ship aft until she came free.

The *Wicked Wench* shuddered yet again from more hits. How much damage had Borya's ship sustained? The twelve-pounders were heavy cannon. Any hits the *Wench*'s gunners made were bound to cause serious damage if they struck in the right place.

Jack beckoned to Chamba to come with him, then turned and headed back down the ladder, to inspect their remaining supply of powder and shot. He should have done that before coming back up to the weather deck after checking on the crew working the pumps, but it was hard to keep everything in his mind when everything was crucial, everything was vital.

He started purposefully across the main deck toward the gunnery master, Jedidiah Parker, just as a ball smashed through the hull right between his third and fourth twelve-pounders.

Men screamed and dove for cover. Wood splintered, sharp fragments flying everywhere.

The concussion spun Jack around, and he felt something hit his left arm near his shoulder. It knocked him sprawling. The sound was deafening.

He lay there on his back, blinking, unable to move for a moment. Chamba's dark face swam into view, his eyes wide and frantic. "Cap'n Sparrow! Cap'n Sparrow! Can you hear me?"

Jack shook his head, then tried to sit up. Chamba helped him. When Jack was up, the lad raised his hand. It was red. "Cap'n," he said. "You bleeding, sir."

Jack looked down at his left shoulder, and saw a three-inch splinter of wood protruding from a hole in his coat. *And Ayisha just mended that coat*, he thought, dazedly.

He tried to move his arm, and it moved. Jack reached up and grabbed his neckcloth with his right hand, then pulled it

free. “Pull it out,” he told Chamba, handing him the strip of fabric. “And then tie this around me arm, tightly.”

“But, Cap’n—”

“That’s an order.”

Chamba reluctantly raised his hand to grasp the splinter. Jack set his teeth and looked away. Men were gathered around something—no, someone—lying sprawled on the deck, a few feet from him. He watched Parker bend over the unmoving figure. Jack felt his stomach lurch as he realized exactly what he was seeing.

He’d seen corpses before, even ones with terrible wounds. But he’d never seen one quite this bad. The body belonged to one of his own crewmen, but he couldn’t tell who it was, because…because…the head was missing.

Jack had nearly forgotten about his arm; the shock of seeing one of his crewmen like that was overwhelming. When Chamba yanked the huge splinter out, he gasped and winced, but his own injury now seemed so trivial by comparison, he didn’t even want to acknowledge it.

Jack felt Chamba wrapping the neckcloth around his arm, then starting to tie it. “Tighter!” Jack snapped. The boy tugged, and Jack hissed in pain. There were still fragments of wood in the wound, judging by how it felt. But at least the bandage should slow the bleeding.

“Now help me up,” Jack said. Chamba came over to his other side. The youth was strong after so many months working as a sailor. He heaved Jack to his feet, then steadied him as the *Wicked Wench* fired yet again, though the number three gun remained silent.

Summoning his strength and balance, Jack managed to walk over to the gunnery master fairly steadily. Parker’s face was smudged nearly as dark as Chamba’s from smoke and powder residue. He gazed at Jack through reddened eyes. “How are our powder and shot holding out, Mr. Parker?”

“Not good, Captain. Three, maybe four more broadsides down here, then a few more rounds of six-pound shot for the

guns on the weather deck….” He shrugged.

Jack frowned, listening. Something was…strange. Different. After a moment, he realized what he was hearing was the *lack* of sound. *Koldunya* had ceased fire.

“Captain!” one of the gunners shouted. “Look!”

Jack and Chamba moved closer, bending to see out the gun port. A longboat was moving away from *Koldunya*’s stern, dragging an anchor cable.

“He’s kedging off,” Jack said. “No wonder he ceased fire. He’ll need hands to the braces, and the windlass. Give him fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, and he’ll be free to nose her to starboard and come up behind our stern, and blow us all to oblivion. Can you hit that longboat, gunner?”

“No, sir,” the lad said, his voice catching. “By the time we spotted it, what with what just happened to Wilson, you know…well, sir, they was already out of range.” He spoke anxiously, as though he thought Jack might scold him for his mistake.

Wilson, Jack thought. *Oh, yes. Nice lad, redheaded. Maybe twenty. Micah Wilson, that was his name.*

Even as he’d been thinking that, with another part of his mind Jack had been arriving at a decision. “We’ll need to shift one of the six-pounders into my cabin,” Jack said to the gunnery master. “Bash out the stern windows, and open fire. Chamba, find Tench and bring him to me on the weather deck, with his tools.”

Chamba took to his heels.

“Mr. Parker, you and your men start unbolting the starboard six-pounder so you can move it into my cabin as soon as the carpenter rigs a gun tackle to secure it. Make sure we save all the six-pound rounds left, so we can at least shoot back as he comes around.”

“Aye, sir!”

Jack turned and headed back up to the weather deck. He used his right hand to help pull himself up the ladder. He’d have to try to get a bit of line, get Chamba to rig a

sling for his left arm, he realized. Every time he moved it, it felt like a hot knife thrust into the flesh.

When he reached the weather deck, Jack turned toward his cabin, then stopped when he saw a body sprawled near the mainmast and another man bending over his injured crewmate. Repressing a groan, Jack ran over, dreading what he would find.

The man on the deck proved to be Etienne de Ver, and the man bending over him was none other than his erstwhile sparring partner, Lucius Featherstone. “What happened?” Jack demanded.

Featherstone looked up. He was chalky beneath his weathered skin. He pointed to the lee clew block, a carved chunk of wood used to hold lines in the rigging, lying in a tangle of tarred rope a few feet away. The block was bigger than a man’s head, and weighed nearly ten pounds. “It came down, Cap’n,” he said, in a choked voice. “A wild shot hit the rigging, and it came down. Would have bashed in me head, but…but de Ver, he jumped—hit me, knocked me clear….”

“Is he dead?” Jack asked, kneeling next to the Frenchman. He didn’t *look* dead. Jack put his fingers against de Ver’s throat, and felt a steady throb.

“I think so. Oh, Lord. He…he just…he must be…”

Featherstone was babbling. With mingled amazement and amusement, Jack realized that the man was nearly in tears. “He’s got a pulse,” Jack announced, briskly. “And he’s breathing.”

“He…Etienne ain’t dead, sir?” Featherstone looked up, incredulously.

“No.” Jack looked at the man’s foot, which was twisted oddly. “I think he’s got a broken ankle, though. It will need to be set.”

Just then Chamba arrived, breathless. “Cap’n, Mister Tench, he be on his way. He be old, can’t move as fast as me.”

Jack nodded. “Chamba, you help Featherstone carry de Ver down to the orlop deck. That’s where they’re taking the wounded.”

Jack stood up as they carried the limp form of the Frenchman away. He looked up, seeing *Koldunya* beginning to move aft as her crew cranked the windlass. In moments, she’d be free. With only one sail left, she wouldn’t be able to move fast, but she didn’t have to go far to get into firing position.

Jack’s heart leaped in his chest, then began slamming hard. He glanced over at his cabin, then scanned the entire weather deck. Where was Tench? And why was the light failing?

Jack turned to look west. The sun was a scarlet streak against the crimson and coral horizon.

Where the bloody hell is my carpenter? In about ten minutes, we’re all dead!

Ayisha and Tarek huddled together at the highest point of the ship, near the taffrail. Tarek had boosted her up first, then used the L-shaped “knees” bolted onto the high railing at the back of the quarterdeck to climb high enough to pull himself up.

It had been agony, waiting with Tarek in Jack’s empty cabin, but Ayisha knew she had to be patient, and seize her best opportunity. She could not afford to waste her power on failed attempts. So she had waited, trying to rest, so she would save her strength. Weaving a spell required that she be able to focus her mind, harness her power, then unleash it to work her will. Affecting physical objects was far more difficult than creating an illusion.

Swiftly, she prepared for the spell, taking out the candle stub in its holder and putting it before her, then threading her handloom. When she wove spells, she actually *wove*, as

a way of visualizing the power she was gathering, then unleashing it at the object of her spell.

When she was prepared, Ayisha moved so she was sitting facing the sloop. To see it, all she needed to do was look up, and across the water.

She did so, staring intently at the sloop. “Tarek…look! It is moving!”

The eunuch turned. “It is. As you guessed, they have broken free. Perhaps he will flee now?”

Ayisha shook her head. “He will not flee. This man, this rogue, as Jack calls him, has malice in his heart. Jack told me how he had encountered this rogue, and another one, named Christophe, five years ago. This one’s name is Borya.”

“Ah, you know his name,” Tarek said. “Good. Names have power.”

“It will help,” she said. “But I must hurry. It will not be long before he is behind this ship, and then he will fire.”

“And *we* will be the first ones in the path of his guns,” Tarek said.

“All the more reason to remove the threat now,” Ayisha said.

Staring intently at the enemy ship, she began to chant, softly, the two names she knew. “Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*.”

Her fingers began to work the threads strung on the handloom. Ayisha continued to chant. In her mind, she pictured an object located within the sloop. She had seen the ones aboard the *Wicked Wench*. She knew what they looked like. Wooden casks. There had been no metal about them that might strike sparks. And inside them, the black powder, the deadly black powder that propelled the cannonballs, or the musket balls, or the pistol balls. She had seen it, seen it do its deadly work, and seen the result, in crumpled bodies, emptied of life. She knew what the black

powder looked like, what it felt like on the fingers, what it smelled like. Jack had shown her.

"Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*."

The power was building, the spell growing within her mind. As she wove it, tightly, compactly, her fingers wove the actual thread, here and now. Ayisha felt the pressure of the target spell forming, weaving in her mind, pushing against her skull, pulsing above her eyes, throbbing, building, and weaving….

"Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*."

Never had she tried to harness this much power, to take so much from herself, from her body's energy, its life-force, as she was doing now. But she was doing it. The black powder within Borya's cask…she could *feel* it now, grainy against her frantically weaving fingers.

"Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya… *Koldunya*."

Her head was pounding with the force of the spell-weaving, pounding like the surf of her island home, pounding like the running of swift feet, pounding like the slam of a hammer against a wooden peg, pounding like the Heart of Zerzura, pounding…

She had the spell almost woven. Most of the threads were in place, in her mind, the threads of power, power so intense it could travel from an object *here* to the grains of powder in a cask *there….*

"Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*. Borya…*Koldunya*."

There was but one more thread to add to the weaving, and it was not the brown of the wooden cask, or the dull black of the powder. No. This thread was bright and hot, yellow and flickering, surrounding an orange-red heart. This thread was *fire*. Ayisha wove it into her spell, looked at her weaving, and saw that it was good; it was perfect. It was also beautiful, as perfection must be always be beautiful. Terrible, perhaps, but also beautiful.

Shifting her gaze from the sloop that had now glided so far that its guns were aimed directly at the *Wicked Wench*'s

stern, barely a hundred feet away, Ayisha brought her searing gaze down, down, focusing it on the candle.

The wick sparked, sparked, sputtered for a moment, then bright yellow flame leaped into being, hot and bright and perfect.

The candle burned. Ayisha poured her spell into that flame, letting the woven threads stretch from the candle to the wooden cask, and the dull black powder within it. She was a vessel for her spell, nothing more.

The candle burned, and the flame lighting its wick stretched and streaked along the yellow-orange flame-thread in her spell…and then it was touching the dull black thread.

She felt, rather than saw the black powder spark, then flame.

Power. It poured out of her, leaving her nothing, an empty vessel, drained of energy, drained of everything.

Ayisha heard the boom of the explosion, but the sound was far away, dim and distant. She tasted blood, then felt herself falling, as blackness much darker than powder swept up, seized her, and dragged her down….

Tench, the carpenter, had just finished securing the last of the new breeching tackle to the deck in Jack’s cabin when Jack heard the voice of Parker calling. “Captain, we’re ready to shift this six-pounder!”

Jack flung open the doors to his cabin. Despite the extremity of their situation, he didn’t think he could stand to watch them bash out his lovely stern windows. He slipped outside as Parker and his men moved the gun, on its wheeled carriage, into his cabin.

Heading over to the port side, he saw *Koldunya* gliding slowly behind his ship. Two more minutes, three at the most, and she’d be in perfect position for a broadside, at close range. He balled his hands into fists, wishing that there were

something he could do. If only he were Zeus, and could hurl a thunderbolt down from heaven, or Poseidon, able to suck a ship down into a maelstrom. If only….

In the dimming light, a spark of orange-yellow flashed within the square outlines of the sloop's gun ports. Jack eyes had barely time to register it, when, with a flash and a boom that knocked him off his feet for the third time that day, *Koldunya* blew up.

This time, Jack had to crawl over to the portside rail, on his knees and one hand, then claw his way up it to get to his feet. He hardly noticed the pain, though. Clinging to the rail, he stared at the orange-tinged smoke billowing up against the eastern sky, his mouth agape. It was real. He hadn't imagined it. The sloop, and Borya with it, was gone, vanished.

Jack was still standing there, staring, when Robby found him. "Dear heaven," Robby whispered, then, "Thank you, Lord."

Jack swallowed, then found his voice, rough with smoke and strained from all the shouting he'd done today. "You really must have prayed hard, Robby."

"I did, Jack."

Jack laughed a little, then snorted. "Nothing divine about it, you know. One of our shots must have started a fire aboard. Somehow, nobody realized it, and it spread to the powder magazine. That's got to be it."

"Jack," Robby said, in tones of excessive patience, "how many times have you had our powder magazine checked today, to make sure none of those hits came anywhere near it?"

"Nine," Jack said, without hesitation.

"Borya was a Pirate Lord. An experienced captain. You'll have a hard time convincing me that he didn't check his magazine."

"Still," Jack insisted, "that has to be it. What else could it be?"

Robby was saved from having to give a reply by the appearance of Frank Connery.

The three officers spoke for a few minutes, deciding their strategy, then they hastened off to their duties. Jack verified that Tench and Newton were back at their repair duties. On his way back to the quarterdeck, he dared to peek inside his cabin, and was relieved to see that his beautiful windows were still intact. He made a mental note to have Parker and his lads haul the cannon out of there, as soon as they could spare the time and the energy.

While he was in his cabin, Jack lit the lantern that hung there, then took a candle with him as he trudged up to the quarterdeck to light the binnacle light and the lantern that hung by the traverse log. The tide was waxing, and he knew that, soon, Frank and Robby would succeed in kedging the *Wench* off the shoal. Soon they'd need a helmsman to steer the vessel.

As he finished lighting the lantern and hung it in its proper place, Jack heard a voice above his head. "Captain…"

He was so startled he actually jumped and gasped. "Who's there?"

"I am up here, Captain," said the voice, in accented, hesitant English. "Tarek."

Jack stepped back, looking up, and in a moment he could see the eunuch's head, silhouetted against the stars. "Tarek! What the devil are you doing up *there*?"

"Ayisha brought me with her, Captain. I need help. I cannot wake her."

"Just a moment. My arm is hurt. Let me get some hands," Jack said, then, turning, he shouted for help. In moments he heard running feet, then Chamba appeared, with burly William Banks and one of the gunnery crew.

Tarek lowered Ayisha, and Banks and Chamba caught her, easing her down into Banks' arms. Jack saw that her gray shawl was tied firmly around her waist. The lee helmsman stood there as Tarek handed down a couple of

items to Chamba, then slid down himself. The bodyguard held out his arms. “I will take her now,” he said to Banks.

In the lantern light, Jack looked at the princess as Tarek cradled her against his broad chest. The illusion held even when she slept, he saw. Blood smeared her disfigured upper lip, and she was as limp as a child’s cloth doll.

“What happened?” Jack demanded.

“Let me get her into her bunk, then I will tell you,” the bodyguard replied, in his slow, halting English.

Jack dismissed Banks and the gunner, then he, Tarek, and Chamba went down to the main deck. As the eunuch stooped to enter the canvas “room,” Tarek reminded Jack about Shabako. Chagrined, the captain immediately dispatched Chamba to the cargo hold to retrieve the young pharaoh, and asked his messenger to convey his most sincere regrets to the Zerzuran ruler for forgetting him.

When they were alone, and the princess was deposited on her makeshift bunk, Jack watched as Tarek gently wiped the blood off Ayisha’s face. “Tell me,” he said, quietly.

“She did what you told her to do, Captain,” Tarek said, not looking up. Jack thought he saw the big man’s eyes glisten in the light of the lantern. “She wanted to help. And she did.”

Jack stared at the bodyguard, completely bewildered. “*What*? What did I—” He stopped, abruptly. “You’re saying that she blew up the sloop’s powder magazine? Using magic?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Jack sat there in silence, for a long moment. “Do you think she’ll recover?” he asked, finally. “I want to thank her. Most humbly.”

Tarek shrugged. “Her heart beats. She breathes. That is all I know.” Then, after a look at Jack’s expression, he added, “She used a very powerful spell. It saps the strength. Some who use such strong magic do not recover. But most do.”

Jack nodded, then stood up. Tarek also stood up to follow him. “You’re going to leave her alone?” the captain said.

“She appears to be asleep,” Tarek said. “I know you need help, Captain, to recover from the battle. I wish to help. It is what she would wish me to do.” Hearing footsteps outside, he nodded. “I believe the Hemef will wish to help, too, or he is not the man I believe him to be.”

Jack headed back up to the weather deck, wondering how many wounded sailors in the history of the world—until tonight—would have been able to truthfully claim that they had been cared for by the eunuch bodyguard of a royal princess and the pharaoh of a lost kingdom. Not many, he decided.

By the time he returned to the quarterdeck, he found Lee Trafford on duty as helmsman. And, as if by magic, when Trafford stepped before the big steering wheel, the *Wicked Wench* shuddered, shuddered again, and then…they were afloat.

Jack ordered Trafford to sail them back down the little inlet, back to the Northwest Providence Channel. He called for sail handlers and men began to appear. Jack ordered them to put up the very minimum amount of sail on her foremast and mizzen. Her mainmast appeared to be mostly intact, but it was hard to be certain, because of the damaged rigging and sail masking most of its length.

By the time the *Wench* began moving, Robby was there, his expression grave. “Jack, I’ve got bad news.”

Jack braced himself, reminding himself that they were still alive and afloat, and that was what counted. “Go on,” he said, steadily.

“The carpenters have patched every hole except two. One of them is in the lower counter.”

Jack winced. The counter was the part of the ship that dropped down from the aft-most part of the stern. The lower

counter lay below the waterline, many feet straight down from the taffrail. “Devilish hard to reach,” he muttered.

“Yes,” Robby said.

“And the other?”

“We’ve got a temporary plug in that one, but it’s still letting in water. We were unlucky enough to have two six-pound balls hit us side-by-side,” Robby said, holding up his two fists, touching, to illustrate. “We’ll need a man in a sling with a plug on the outside of the hull, and a man with a plug on the inside of the hull, and they’ll need to drive their plugs in at the same time to get anything like a tight seal.”

“Damn,” Jack said. “Tell them just to keep plugging it. We’ll have to wait for daylight to try to get to the hole in the lower counter. We just don’t have enough men to handle everything!”

Robby nodded. “I know.”

“I’ve been around the decks. Our lads are dropping where they stand. The main deck looks like the last act of a tragedy, bodies everywhere.”

“At least they’re sleeping bodies,” Robby pointed out.

“Yes,” Jack said. “At the moment, the count stands at three dead, seven wounded. But…” he added, “by morning it’s likely to be four.”

Robby nodded. One of the topmen had a broken leg that was so bad, pieces of bone protruded through the skin. The *Wench* had no surgeon. The leg needed to be amputated. Frank Connery had volunteered to undertake the job, as soon as he had finished his duties as second mate, but Jack doubted the poor fellow could be saved.

“How are we doing on the pump, Robby?”

“So far we’re keeping the water level even, Jack. But that’s bound to change.”

Jack nodded. Manning the bilge pump was hard work. His crew was already exhausted. At some point, it was inevitable that they’d fall behind. The *Wicked Wench* would take on more and more water…until she sank.

“Thanks, Robby,” he said. “I’m going to take a look around, check things over. Why don’t you stretch out in my cabin for half an hour, get some sleep?”

“What about you? Jack, you’re *wounded*.” Robby stared at the sleeve of Jack’s coat. The whole sleeve was wet, and if it hadn’t been dark, it would have shown red.

“I’m too keyed up to sleep, Robby, and that’s the truth. Now go lie down. That’s an order. If you can’t sleep, pray some more. We could use it.”

Robby shrugged. “Don’t think I’m not, Jack.”

Jack took a lantern to light his way, and began walking the perimeter of the weather deck. He was careful not to step on any exhausted crewmen he encountered. It was a pleasure to see them whole, not wounded. He wasn’t sure what he was checking for. To see if any of them were actually wounded or dead, as opposed to sleeping, he supposed.

He trudged along, his eyes burning from the smoke of the battle, feeling like Diogenes with his lantern. As he stepped over bodies, he wondered how long he should let these men sleep before he began waking some of them to take over on the pump.

Jack paused, squinting blearily, raising his lantern high to shed its light on one of the men who was splashed with dried blood. Was it his own blood, or that of a wounded or dead shipmate? Was he still alive?

After a moment, a deep, rumbling snore reassured him.

“Ahoy!” shouted a voice to starboard.

Jack whirled around so fast he nearly dropped his lantern. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

He blinked painfully as he made out running lights not far away, shining in the darkness, and heard the *swish* of water against a bow. The lights swam before him as he tried to focus his stinging eyes.

Am I hallucinating?

“Ahoy!” shouted the voice again, then continued in Spanish, “Anyone alive over there? Do you need help?”

It was real. There really was a ship out there, hailing him!

Jack hesitated. *A Spanish vessel…just my bloody luck.*

But at least England and Spain weren’t currently at war…or they hadn’t been, last he’d heard.

What if she’s another pirate vessel? Two in one bloody day? Should I keep silent, hope they’ll pass by?

Jack told himself not to be ridiculous. Even having everything valuable on the *Wicked Wench* stolen, and himself and his crew sold as slaves, was better than sinking to the bottom. And most pirates he knew wouldn’t ask if another ship needed help.

Jack put his lantern down on the deck, then cupped his hands around his mouth. “Ahoy!” he shouted, then continued, in Spanish, “Merchant vessel *Wicked Wench* here! Pirates attacked us today! Yes! We need help!”

He heard the voice drift across the water, no longer shouting, but evidently addressing someone aboard. He only picked up the word “*Capitan*.”

Clearing his throat, Jack spat over the side, wishing he had something to drink. He cupped his hands around his mouth again. “What ship are you?” he shouted, still in Spanish.

There was a pause, then, “*Venganza*!” floated across the water.

Jack’s eyes opened wide. He gasped, astonished, then, slowly, he began to grin. He wanted to dance a jig, but he was too tired, and his arm ached too much.

Clutching the railing to steady himself, he yelled, this time in English, “*Esmeralda*? Are you there?”

A different voice responded this time. “*Dios mio…**Jack**?”*

Jack closed his burning eyes, heaving a long, profound sigh of relief. *Robby will never let me hear the end of this….*

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Chapter Fourteen
Hard Bargains

An hour later, Jack sat on the deck of the hove-to *Wicked Wench*, leaning up against the gun carriage of his portside six-pounder, a blanket flung around his shoulders against the breeze and the dew of the Bahamian night. He took another sip of his second tankard of the hot, sweetened tea Esmeralda had brought with her, insisting he drink it, and decided that, all things considered, he quite loved bossy, competent women.

Last month it had been Ayisha, mastering that demon-horse, Caesar, ordering him to relax his spine so he wouldn't bounce when they trotted, and calmly telling him that he must go to the New World to find her brother.

Now it was Esmeralda, striding around his ship, clad in her boarding clothes: men's britches tucked into tall, folded-over boots, loose-sleeved front-laced ivory shirt, and her metal-reinforced leather corselet. A long satin waistcoat, embroidered in red and gold, and one of her wide-brimmed hats—red, adorned with gold braid and two sweeping plumes—made her look every inch the pirate queen. A gaggle of her far more sartorially challenged (and in some cases downright villainous-looking) mates dogged her every footstep as they awaited her next order.

With *Venganza* hove-to only a hundred feet away, Jack had overheard the speech she'd made to her crew regarding her decision to rescue the *Wicked Wench*. "My friends, we have encountered a merchant ship in dire need of our help. I hereby pledge to Captain Jack my assistance, and the assistance of my crew. My reason for doing so is simple:

Captain Jack was a friend of my grandfather's. Don Rafael liked and respected him. If Don Rafael were only alive today, may all the saints and the Virgin bless him, he would do as I am doing. So, may I count on your help, my friends?"

And, of course, her crew had enthusiastically pledged their support. What red-blooded pirate could deny a woman like that, after all?

After Jack had ordered the *Wench* to heave-to, he'd gone into his own cabin and found Robby, fast asleep. When he'd awakened him, saying rescue had arrived, a slow, triumphant smile had crept across the first mate's face. Jack had braced himself, but, to his everlasting credit, Robby had not actually *said* "I told you so" regarding the power of prayer.

As the Spaniards had climbed aboard, Jack, with Robby at his side, had greeted them courteously, shaking hands with the mates, and thanking everyone for their help in his fluent, if not rapid, Spanish. If one of them recognized him as a former pirate, and reported him to Teague, he'd deal with that later, Jack had decided.

It was a mercy Robby and Frank were still on their feet, Jack thought, because he had reached his limit. The first order Esmeralda had given when she'd climbed aboard had been, "Jack, you go over there and sit down, and don't move until I give you permission." Meekly, he'd obeyed, and he had to admit, she was right. He could tell he was just about finished. His shoulder throbbed even when he didn't move it, and his head throbbed in concert with it. Not to mention his back and backside, from being flung to the deck repeatedly.

At least Robby and Frank had kept him apprised as to the ship's condition, as their pirate rescuers set to work. Spanish pirates now worked the bilge pump. Esmeralda's carpenters had tackled and plugged the side-by-side six-pounder holes. The lower counter hole would have to wait

for daylight, as there simply wasn't any way to bring enough light for a repair crew to work.

But the rest of his ship had plenty of light as the repair work continued; the Spaniards had brought extra lanterns with them. Best of all, *Venganza* had an actual ship's surgeon as part of her crew. Minutes after Esmeralda's arrival, Frank Connery had escorted Doctor Martinez below to the orlop deck, to tend to Jack's wounded.

Mindful of Esmeralda's last order to him, Jack finished the last of the food *Venganza*'s cook had sent over for him and his officers. It hadn't been fancy fare, but the bread, smoked meat, olives, and cheese tasted like ambrosia. He washed the last swallow of his repast down with more of the tea—plain bloody tea; she hadn't allowed him to put so much as a drop of rum in it! *Bossy woman. Beautiful, competent, bossy woman....*

Jack pulled the blanket more closely around his shoulders, trying to settle himself more comfortably against the carriage of the six-pounder. His eyelids grew heavy, and he eyed the recumbent forms of his snoring crewmen enviously. When had he last slept? Oh, yes, he'd gone to his cabin to nap for a few hours, after the little party he'd hosted to celebrate Shabako's rescue. That nap seemed half a lifetime ago, now.

As he recalled that little interlude, Jack's lip curled. He'd been so smug, so bloody pleased with himself while they'd all been sitting in his cabin, laughing and sharing their experiences. He remembered Tia Dalma, and her talk of destiny, fate, and how everything was connected. What was that word for the heroes of stories who, through their arrogance, pride, and self-confidence, made incredibly stupid decisions, or unknowingly violated the laws of the gods, man, or nature? Hubris, that was the term. All that stuff about "pride goeth before a fall."

Jack looked up at the sky. *Guess you showed me, didn't you, Zeus, or whoever you are that metes out punishments*

to those guilty of hubris. I suppose I should be grateful that you didn't send harpies, or whatever they call those monster women, to hound me and teach me the error of my ways. Instead you send me beautiful, competent women, to save my sorry arse.

He wondered how Ayisha was doing. For a moment he considered going down to the main deck and checking on her, but being honest with himself, he wasn't sure he could walk that far. *She doesn't need you, mate, she has Tarek and her brother looking after her.*

His eyes still burned. Jack closed them….

"Jack? *Jack*!"

Startled, Jack opened his eyes and sat up straight. Esmeralda was there, peering at him, concerned. "Oh, hello, love," he said. "I wasn't asleep, just resting me eyes."

"Sleep is what you need, Jack," she said. "I'm going to take a look at your arm, and see if it needs the surgeon. Is that your cabin?" She pointed.

"Yes," he said. "It's the one with the cannon next to the bunk. But I need to check on—"

"Everything necessary is being attended to," she said. "I sent your second mate off to his bunk, but your first mate is with my first mate, and they're making sure everything is being done. It's nearly midnight, Jack."

Jack looked up at the stars. She was right.

"Manuel!" she called.

"Aye, Doña?"

She spoke in Spanish too rapid for Jack's fogged brain to follow. He caught the word for "cannon," but that was all.

Jack winced as she removed the blanket and bent over him. "Do you want to try to save this coat?" she asked. "You can get bloodstains out with cold water. Or I could just cut it off."

He nodded. "I don't have as many clothes as you do, love. Can't afford to lose the coat."

The next few minutes were decidedly unpleasant. But finally he sat there, bare to the waist, while she peered at his left shoulder by the light of two lanterns. “I can handle this,” she decided. “No need to take Doctor Martinez away from his patients below.”

Jack didn’t want to look. “Does it need cauterizing?” he asked, envisioning red-hot irons. He couldn’t disguise the fear in his voice.

“No, just a matter of picking the remaining splinters out, then getting it clean.”

It seemed to take forever. Jack gasped and winced with every splinter. “Stop being such a baby,” Esmeralda said. “And if you don’t hold still, I’ll have you restrained.”

“But it hurts,” he muttered.

“You’re lucky, Jack,” she said. “And you know it. Now hold *still*!”

Finally she was satisfied. “I’ll have the surgeon look at it in daylight, tomorrow. Just to be sure,” she said. She knelt on the deck before him, then, with a wet rag, she cleaned the blood off his arm, below the wound. Then she took another and began wiping his face. Jack grimaced. “I can wash me own face, Esmeralda!”

“You should see yourself,” she said. “You’re as black as a Moor.” The cloth did indeed come away black. When she began wiping his hands, Jack looked down at them. It was hard to believe that only a few days ago they’d been clean enough to pass for a lord’s.

“Now for that wound. Hand me that bottle,” she ordered the young Spaniard who was acting as her assistant.

Jack recognized the familiar bouquet just before she poured rum all over the wound. The fiery liquor burned. He couldn’t help it; he yelped.

“You might have warned me. Then I could have braced meself,” he grumped.

As she stopped pouring, he grabbed the bottle with his right hand. “Or, better yet, let me have a nip beforehand.

Give me that! Waste of perfectly good rum," he added accusingly. Raising the bottle, Jack tipped a goodly quantity down his gullet.

When he finally lowered it, Esmeralda said mildly, "That was more than a nip."

"I needed it," he said.

She didn't argue with him, just bandaged up his arm, securing the bandages in place with a red bandana she wore over her hair at times. By the time she finished, Jack was feeling no pain.

"Now, off to bed with you," she said, standing up. With the help of her young crewman, she grabbed his right arm, and heaved him to his feet. She held him steady as he swayed.

Esmeralda gave more orders in rapid Spanish, but Jack paid no attention. His feet seemed to be floating half a foot off the *Wicked Wench*'s deck. It was a very pleasant sensation—one he hadn't experienced in quite a while.

They made their way across the weather deck to the door of Jack's cabin, and her lad opened it, hung up the lantern, deposited Jack's bloody clothing, neatly folded, on the chair, then vanished. Jack blinked. The six-pounder was gone.

"Th' cannon's gone," he mumbled, peering about. "Why is th' cannon gone?"

"Because I didn't fancy sleeping with a cannon," Esmeralda said, matter-of-factly. "Here you go, Jack." One-handed, she threw back the covers. "Now sit down, and I'll get your shoes off."

Jack plunked down onto his bunk. "'M glad th' cannon's gone," he said. "Didn't look right in me beautiful cabin." He blinked at her as she knelt down to pull off his shoes, then his stockings. "There y'go, undresh—undressing me again, love. 'S becoming a habit."

Esmeralda looked up at him, laughing. "You're right, Jack. Only last time we were in *my* cabin, not yours."

“That’s right, you haven’ sheen—seen—me beautiful cabin before! Or me beautiful ship! How do you like ’em?” He swept his right hand in an all-encompassing gesture.

Esmeralda gently pushed him down, then pulled up the sheet to cover him. “Very nice ship, Jack. Is she fast?”

Jack grinned. “Two daysh off the Triangle record, love, on me first voyage sailin’ her.”

“Impressive,” she said. “We’ll have to race sometime.” She removed her plumed hat, setting it carefully on the table.

“I would *love* that, darlin’,” Jack chirped. “And if I win, you give me that *magnificent* hat!”

She took off her waistcoat and hung it over the back of the chair. “If you win, I’ll buy you your choice of hats.”

“No, no,” Jack said. “I want *that* one, love.”

“Oh, very well,” she said, sitting down on the chair to remove her boots and stockings. “You drive a hard bargain, Captain Sparrow. If I win, what do *I* get?”

“My undying admiration?” Jack suggested.

Esmeralda stood up to unhook her corselet. Jack eyed this process appreciatively. “I already have that, Jack,” she said.

“You do,” he conceded. “Bloody boshh—bossy—competent woman…” He looked up at her, holding her eyes. “Did I tell you that I *love* bossy competent women?”

She sat down on the edge of the bunk. “You do?”

“I do,” he said. With an effort that made him wince, he scooted over to make room for her in the bunk. “Especially if they’re beautiful ones.” Reaching over with his right hand, he tugged on the lacing of her shirt, undoing it.

She smiled at him, then reached up and took the pins out of her hair. Jack watched the black mass fall loose in soft waves, reaching halfway down her back. Then she blew out the lantern.

Jack heard the rustle as she removed her britches and shirt, but his eyes hadn’t adjusted yet, so he couldn’t see

her. He felt the bunk give as she settled down beside him. “Good night, Jack.”

“Don’t I get a good night kiss?”

He heard her soft laugh, then saw the outline of her head and shoulders as she bent over him. Her mouth was every bit as sweet as he remembered. “Esmeralda?” he mumbled, when she drew away.

“*Sí*, Jack?”

“*Gracias, mi amor*.”

“*De nada*.”

Jack opened his eyes the next morning to the sound of soft breathing that was not his own. When he moved his left arm, it was sore, but the hot, stabbing pain was gone. He managed to wriggle out of the bunk without disturbing her, and use the head. But when he crawled back in, she awoke. “Sorry, love,” he whispered. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Esmeralda raised her head to peer at the open stern windows. “It’s past dawn. I should get up. Things to do today. May I use the captain’s head, Captain?”

“By all means, love,” Jack said.

“Um, would you mind facing the wall, Jack?”

“I would,” he said, honestly, “but a gentleman always honors such a request from his lady.” He turned over.

After a short interval, he heard the door to the head open and close again. The soft sound of fabric, as of a shirt being donned, followed. “Esmeralda?”

“Yes?”

“May I turn over again?”

“All right.”

The sight of her wearing nothing but her long shirt, with the lacings loose, was an experience Jack knew he would remember on long, lonely voyages for many a year. He smiled. “Good morning, Captain.”

“Good morning, Captain,” she replied, then looked thoughtful. “I’ve never slept with another captain,” she confessed. “Last night was the first time.”

Jack thought about that for a moment. “Neither have I,” he said.

“What about that time last year?” she demanded, with mock indignation. “Are you telling me you’ve forgotten that night?”

“I didn’t *sleep* that night, love.”

She laughed. “Jack, nobody can make me laugh the way you do.”

“About last night,” Jack said, slowly. “Me memory is a bit…foggy.”

“I am not surprised by that,” Esmeralda said. “You were wounded and lost a fair amount of blood. I understand you took a knock on the head. And, of course, you were drunk.”

“All of those things are true,” Jack agreed. “But I do remember watching you unhook your corselet, and let down your hair…and then you kissed me….”

“Ah, you *do* remember.”

“But after we kissed…” He hesitated. “Nothing. Did we…?” He paused, delicately.

“No,” she said. “You fell asleep.”

“Oh,” Jack said. He moved his left arm, so she could see. “Me arm feels much better today. And I’m not a bit sleepy, now.” He gave her a tentative, hopeful smile. “Perhaps we can, er, remedy last night’s, er, omission?”

Esmeralda smiled at him. “I think that might be possible.”

She climbed back into the bunk, then stretched out on her back, her hands behind her head. “Amazing,” she murmured, gazing around at his cabin walls. “Last night I thought it might be a trick of the light, but it’s not.”

Jack smiled happily and moved closer. “I picked out the colors meself,” he said. Hitching himself up, he kissed the

tip of her right elbow. “They really make the place bright and cheery, don’t they?”

“Yes, very bright,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything quite this bright before. It’s…unique.”

Turning her head, she smiled at him, a smile that made his pulse speed up. “Like you, Jack.”

Jack kissed her shoulder, then trailed kisses along it, moving in the general direction of her mouth, with a few interesting detours along the way. “I’m so glad you like it, love….”

Later that day, after the leak in the lower counter had finally been plugged, and the remainder of the water the *Wicked Wench* had taken pumped out, Esmeralda and her men returned to *Venganza*, but the two ships remained hove-to, drifting not far from each other. There were still many repairs to make on the *Wicked Wench*, and Doctor Martinez wanted to check on his patients for the next few days.

To Jack’s surprise, the topman whose leg had been amputated had survived the night. Doctor Martinez told him that if the leg didn’t mortify, his prognosis was favorable. At Esmeralda’s request, the doctor took a look at Jack’s arm. After his examination, Doctor Martinez told his *capitan* that if she ever decided to retire from piracy, she could hang out her shingle as a *médico*. The wound was clean, and already healing. Jack would need to wear a sling to support the arm for a week or so, but would make a full recovery.

Ayisha did not awaken from her long sleep until nearly noon, and when she did, she was very weak, Tarek reported, but completely lucid. Jack asked to see her, but Tarek told him she wasn’t strong enough to talk. So he asked the eunuch to tell her that he’d see her on the morrow.

After his talk with Tarek, Jack braced himself, then went below to the cargo hold, to assess how badly the EITC’s cargo had been affected by the battle and the water. He

took Chamba with him, knowing the agile young crewman would be able to scramble amid the barrels as a one-armed captain could not. After an hour inspecting the cargo, Jack reported to Robby, with a sigh, that the situation wasn't good, but could have been worse. Though the *Wicked Wench* had taken on quite a bit of water during and after the battle, most of the cargo hold had never actually been submerged. But everywhere *Koldunya*'s cannonballs had caused leaks, barrels of the muscovado, or raw sugar, now appeared to contain sugar syrup. Some even sloshed when they were moved. Most of the molasses containers, which were better sealed, appeared to be unharmed. Jack estimated that perhaps half the cargo might have to be declared a loss.

Before she left to return to *Venganza* that day, Esmeralda invited Jack and Robby to dine with her. Robby was hesitant, but Jack assured him that he would be welcome, and made a point of mentioning Esmeralda's estimable cook. Accordingly, they washed up, combed their hair, and donned clean clothes for their visit. Jack wasn't able to wear a coat, because of his sling, but he did put on his embroidered waistcoat and new shoes. Robby rowed them over to *Venganza* in the repaired dinghy.

Esmeralda greeted them wearing a sky blue gown trimmed with dark blue lace, and a matching lace mantilla, worn over the traditional tall comb. Jack had never seen her wear one before. It gave her an illusion of height. The delicate blue lace framed her face, and set off her sapphire and diamond earrings.

When she greeted them in her cabin, Jack bowed over her hand and kissed it. Robby, too, bowed over her hand, but did not kiss it. They had wine, a good Spanish rosé, and reminisced about Shipwreck Cove, before dinner was served.

"Ever since I saw you last year, I've been thinking about the cove," Jack confessed to her. "Remembering the good

times…when we went swimming, and fenced together."

She smiled warmly. "Those *were* good times. Some of my favorite memories."

"Do you remember that night we went to The Drunken Lady?" Jack asked. "And your grandfather was waiting for us to return—his pocket watch in one hand, and the other on the hilt of his sword?"

She giggled. "I remember being glad that we were back on time."

Although Christophe had been with them that night, neither of them referred to him.

"I remember the last time we went to The Drunken Lady," Jack said. "And you talked to Marie. I suppose…I mean, she's had her baby by now?"

"Of course. It only takes nine months, Jack, not five years," she said, amused.

"Boy or girl?"

"She had a little boy," Esmeralda said. "And then, a year later, a little girl. And the last time I heard from her, she said she was expecting again. We write. But I haven't seen her in years."

"You haven't been to Shipwreck Cove?"

"Oh, certainly. But they aren't there anymore. When Steve discovered Marie was with child, he packed them up and they left. He said it wouldn't be fair to a child to try and raise it in Shipwreck Cove. He'd saved his money, and they moved to a little town named Raleigh, in the Colonies, and bought a tavern there."

"Steve did the right thing," Jack said, gravely. "He was right; Shipwreck Cove is no place to raise a child."

The fact that Jack had been raised there wasn't mentioned.

"So what happened to The Drunken Lady?" Robby said. "I used to enjoy going there. Marie was a good cook. I remember her spiced apple tarts."

Jack nodded. “They were good, weren’t they? You’re making me hungry, Robby.”

“Good,” Esmeralda said. “Because they will be bringing our dinner any moment. The tavern’s still there, at Shipwreck Cove, but they don’t serve food any more, just spirits. It’s gone downhill, sad to say.”

The meal was, as Jack had promised, delicious, and especially tasty to men who had subsisted for months on ship’s biscuit, salted meat, and apples. Esmeralda’s cook had prepared sea turtle soup for the first course. The main entrée was roasted marinated pork, accompanied by fried yellow cornmeal cakes, white potatoes, cooked greens, and for a sweet at the end of the meal, fried plantains drizzled with a banana flavored liqueur. Pirates almost always ate better than merchant sailors or naval crewmen. Their voyages were usually short, by comparison with those of other mariners, so they restocked more frequently with fresh food.

While they dined, Esmeralda asked her guests to tell her the entire story of the chase and fight with *Koldunya*. “I’ll tell you our story,” Jack promised, “but then you have to tell me how the devil you happened to be close enough to Great Abaco to see the explosion when *Koldunya* blew up.”

Esmeralda nodded. “Fair enough. But you go first.”

Jack undertook to give her a summary of the events, with occasional help from Robby. He was careful to leave out any mention of Zerzura or its treasure, or of his approaching search for Christophe. Jack knew that Esmeralda had been searching for the man who had killed Don Rafael ever since her grandfather’s murder. If she’d known that Jack was about to make an alliance with him, to go after treasure, she’d be justifiably furious.

Jack *did* mention the Zerzurans, but told Esmeralda the same tale he’d spun for his crew, about the three former slaves being highborn members of a previously unknown

tribe in northern Africa. As an example of the tribe's skill with weaving and sewing, he showed her his waistcoat.

Esmeralda was fascinated by his tale, and admired his waistcoat. "What is the princess like?"

Jack chose his words carefully. "Princess Ayisha appears to be middle-aged, maybe older. The first time I saw her, I thought that the kindest word you could use to describe her would be 'homely.'"

"You said that she took a hand in the battle? How?"

Jack glanced over at Robby, who was staring at him, obviously wondering whether this was yet another fabrication on Jack's part. Jack looked at her. "Esmeralda, you've been sailing around the Caribbean for a long time," he said. "You know about curses, and magic, and hoodoo, and Obeah. You know that, in the Caribbean, they really exist. Right?"

"Jack, I've seen Davy Jones, remember?"

"That's right, you did," Jack said. "I was thinking about that day not long ago."

"So, what's this about magic?" she asked.

"Well, a lot of that magic and Obeah lore in the Caribbean comes from the Africans that have been transported here, savvy?" Jack said.

She nodded.

"Well, I didn't really know it until a few weeks ago, but it seems that the princess I'm transporting for Mr. Beckett is pretty skilled in that kind of thing. Until yesterday, I thought her ability was limited to casting illusions. But it seems she can do a lot more than that." He took a deep breath. "When Ayisha said, 'Can I help?' I told her 'No, not unless you can blow up Borya's powder magazine.'"

Now Robby, too, was sitting up straight in his seat, gazing intently at Jack.

Jack shrugged and shook his head, turning both palms upward. "So…she did it."

“*Ayisha* blew it up?” Robby blurted. “She really did? She caused that?”

“According to Tarek, she did exactly that,” Jack said.

“What a fascinating tale! I have to meet this woman with her extraordinary abilities,” Esmeralda mused. “You know I get lonely for the company of other women, Jack. When she is feeling up to receiving visitors, you must introduce us, and I’ll invite her to have dinner, just the two of us, for some woman talk.”

“Uhhhhhh…” Jack hadn’t expected this. The conversation had taken a decidedly awkward turn. He glanced at Robby, who was smiling at him, obviously enjoying his discomfort.

Jack drummed his fingers on the tabletop for a moment, thinking, then cleared his throat. “Well, you see, remember I said she could create illusions?”

She raised an eyebrow inquiringly. “Yes. What are you trying to say, Jack?”

Jack groped for words. Anything he said at this point would come out wrong.

Robby took the bull by the horns. “He’s trying to say that Princess Ayisha turned out *not* to be old and ugly, Lady Esmeralda,” he said. “She’s young and very pretty. But until recently, we had no idea how she really looked, because she disguises herself using magic.”

The lady pirate burst out laughing. “Oho! *Now* I know why my darling Jack was at a most unusual loss for words.” She smiled at the captain fondly. “Only you, Jack, only you, could take an ugly old woman on a rescue mission, and be assured that she would, when all is said and done, turn out to be neither ugly nor old!”

Jack cleared his throat, feeling heat creep up his face. He shrugged.

Once Robby realized that Esmeralda wasn’t angry, he, too, began laughing. They laughed until they were breathless, while Jack sat there, trying to smile.

Finally, the two of them sputtered down into occasional giggles.

“I didn’t know about Ayisha blowing up Borya’s ship until just now, Lady Esmeralda,” Robby added. “So I’m partly laughing at myself. You see, I thought the powder magazine exploding was a genuine miracle, sent by Our Lord because I prayed for one.”

“Oh, *muchacho*,” she said. “I understand.”

The young first mate shook his head, ruefully. “Lady Esmeralda, you should have seen Jack’s expression last night, before he knew about Ayisha, when I told him that it was the power of prayer that had caused the explosion and saved us.”

Robby twirled his wineglass, but shook his head when she raised the bottle to offer a refill. Jack, however, took one. Robby shrugged. “Though I still prefer to believe that the Lord *does* work in mysterious ways, and that He sent Ayisha to us, and gave her the ability to work magic.” He finished the last of his wine. “So, really, there was only one miracle then, not two.”

“There’s such a thing as coincidence, mate,” Jack said.

“True,” Esmeralda said, fiddling with her wineglass.

“Please, Jack! Allow me just the *one* miracle! And it *was* a miracle that you happened to be near Great Abaco, and could see the smoke cloud from the explosion, and came to investigate, Lady Esmeralda,” Robby said.

Esmeralda hesitated. “Robby, *muchacho* …I, too, believe in miracles—and prayer. I went to a convent school, after all.” She smiled faintly. “But alas, it was neither a miracle nor a coincidence that I was on the eastern side of Great Abaco Island last night.”

Jack frowned. “What brought you there, then?”

“There is a bit of a story to it,” she said. “You know that I have been looking for de Rapièr ever since he killed my grandfather. Three years, I have searched, and still that

perro eludes me.” Her hand clenched on the tabletop, but her voice was controlled.

Jack nodded, but didn’t meet her eyes, instead picking at an imaginary spot on his new waistcoat. “I know, Esmeralda.” He salved his guilt about not being honest with her about using Tia Dalma’s compass to find Christophe by recalling his vow to settle the score between himself and the rogue captain—as soon as he had the third bracelet.

Esmeralda sighed, relaxing her hand, then continued, “Every time I put in at a harbor to sell prizes I’ve taken, I make contact with the person in that port who knows things. You know the type I mean, I am sure. I offer to pay these informants for information about the whereabouts of rogue pirates. I do not distinguish between those two *cucarachas*. I figured if I captured Borya, I could convince him to tell me anything he knew about Christophe’s whereabouts fairly quickly. After all, he gave up his confederates five years ago without any physical persuasion. You remember, Jack.”

“I do,” he confirmed.

“This past spring, one of my informants told me that the rogue pirate who sailed a sloop—Borya, in other words—was doing a search of his own. Borya offered to pay anyone who could report the whereabouts of a certain Captain Jack Sparrow, a merchant captain who was sailing an East Indiaman for the East India Trading Company.”

Jack and Robby exchanged a glance. “In a way, it’s flattering,” Jack said, with a faint smile. “*Captain Jack Sparrow*. My fame is spreading.”

“Or your infamy,” Robby suggested.

“It’s actually reassuring, though,” Jack added, thinking aloud. “For years I’ve worried about Teague getting word that I was alive, and hunting me down so he could hang me from *Troubadour*’s yardarm. But if Borya could find out I’m still alive, so could Teague. So he either hasn’t bothered to inquire, or he knows and doesn’t care to pursue the matter.

So I don’t need to worry about getting nabbed by his henchmen.”

“I don’t believe that Teague would order you hunted down so he could execute you,” Esmeralda said. “I’ve told you this before. As you English say, *sangre* is thicker than *agua*.”

“You don’t know him the way I do, love,” Jack said, “but all that is beside the point, which is that Borya was keeping tabs on me. It’s unlikely he did that because he missed my charming self. So why was he paying for information about me?”

“My guess is that Borya wanted revenge,” Esmeralda said. “You were the one that unmasked him as a rogue, after all. The Little Butcher was not in the Northwest Providence Channel by coincidence, Jack. He knew you had returned. I spoke to an informant of mine, who was also an informant of Borya’s. From what he told me, Borya discovered you were back, then he sailed north to one of the most-used routes on the Triangle, and waited there to attack you.”

“How did you happen to discover all this, love?” Jack asked.

She poured herself another glass of wine, and took a sip. “Two weeks ago I had some business in Kemps Bay, on Andros. While I was there, Giles sought me out. He’s not a Frenchman. He’s part Mayan, from Yucatán, part African, and part…” She snapped her fingers as she hunted for the English word. “Stoat, is that what you call the animal in your country? A slinking, long little creature, one that robs nests and henhouses?”

“Weasel,” Robby supplied.

“Ah, yes. At any rate, he is sly and would sell his own grandmother for a peso, but at heart, he is a coward. He owns a boat, and he and his boat are available for hire to sail passengers between the islands. Giles is a man that knows many people, in many places.”

Jack held out his wineglass, and she refilled it, then continued, “A week ago, Giles told me that he had been paid twenty pesos by Borya for passing along the news that a certain Captain Jack Sparrow had recently brought a cargo to Antigua, then departed, heading north, most probably starting on the next leg of the Triangle.”

Jack and Robby exchanged glances.

Esmeralda smiled faintly. “Giles was very eager to tell me everything he told Borya, plus everything he had observed *about* Borya. He also made a point of telling me that he charged me only half as much as Borya paid him, for twice the information.”

“Why would he do that?” Jack wondered.

Esmeralda gave him a look. “Why do you *think*, Jack? Giles wants me.”

“Oh,” he said. “Sorry, I’m a bit slow, darlin’. Got hit on the head yesterday, if you recall.”

She smiled, then added, “I could tell that Giles was holding something back, so I leaked a few tears and confessed to him that you were actually my beloved cousin, by way of an ancestor who survived the wreck of the Armada and married an Englishwoman. Giles was very sympathetic. He then told me, for free, that he’d spotted *Koldunya* a few days later near the Northwest Providence Channel.”

“So you decided to go hunting for Borya yourself,” Robby said.

“*Sí, muchacho*. I headed northwest from Andros, to follow the channel, then left it and swung east past Grand Bahama, past Little Abaco, then east past the northern tip of Great Abaco. I posted a lookout constantly.” She smiled faintly. “It paid off, actually. I took a very nice schooner that was carrying fabric bound for Charleston, and then a flute loaded with tea and spices. So my crew had no complaint.”

“And then you headed south, down that deepwater channel that lies on the eastern side of Great Abaco,” Jack

guessed.

“Precisely. I had given up my search. I was perhaps four miles past Hole in the Wall on Great Abaco when my lookout saw the smoke of the explosion to the northwest, the clouds still yellow that high up from the last rays of the sun. When I heard about big smoke clouds, I thought perhaps Borya had taken some unfortunate vessel, then fired her to hide the evidence. Lately, both rogue pirates have been burning the ships they take. So I took a sighting on the cloud, and set my course by it.”

She shrugged and sipped more wine. “So, as you can see, it was not a miracle that I was there. I actually had been out hunting for Borya.”

“Actually, I’d say it was as likely a candidate to be a miracle as I’ve ever encountered, love,” Jack said, surprising himself, as well as both of his listeners. “I mean, think about it. What are the chances that you would be close enough to sight the evidence of the explosion? If you’d been five miles farther along your course, or had gone five miles less….” He shrugged.

Esmeralda and Robby looked at each other and smiled conspiratorially.

Before they left *Venganza*, Esmeralda conducted Jack and Robby on a tour of her ship. She was rightfully proud of her vessel. Her crew might be pirates, but the frigate was as well maintained as she had been back in her days as part of the Royal Navy.

“She’s the perfect pirate ship, love,” Jack said, as they stood on the bow. “A fit vessel for the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean.”

“If she were properly armed, your *Wicked Wench* could be every bit as good as *Venganza*, Jack.”

“Oh, we know that,” Robby said. “We both said that, first time we laid eyes on her.”

Jack shot his first mate a quelling glance.

Esmeralda's eyes gleamed. "You should think about joining me, Jack," she urged. "Oh, I realize you couldn't do it immediately. You're going to need to put in at a big shipyard to get the *Wench* seaworthy. But after she's been professionally repaired, we could meet somewhere safe for both of us, say, Port Royal, then you and Robby can pay off your merchant crew. I'll lend you the *dinero*. Then I can send enough of my men aboard so you can sail to Tortuga, and pick up a pirate crew. Think of it, Jack! The two of us. We'd be unbeatable!"

"But I'm still under sentence of death from the Brethren," Jack pointed out.

"Ah, but you can redeem yourself by dispatching the rogues you freed," Esmeralda said. "Borya is dead, so half that task is already accomplished. Our first venture together will be to hunt down Christophe. I want the satisfaction of killing him myself, but I'll make sure you can take credit for doing it, Jack. That way you'd, um"—she snapped her fingers—"expiate your crime. With both rogues dead, and me to vouch for you, the Pirate Lords will cancel your sentence. You could go back on the account. We could sail together!"

Jack drew a deep breath. "It's tempting, love," he said. "But I don't think I'm ready to go back to waking up in a cold sweat after dreaming about nooses."

The spark in Esmeralda's eyes vanished. She sighed, then nodded. "I understand." She hesitated, glancing at Robby, who took the hint and wandered off to the other side of the bow, out of earshot. "At least we can be together for more than a day, this time. Shall I row over tonight, toward the end of the middle watch?"

Jack smiled. "I'd be miserable and lonely and wouldn't get a wink of sleep if you didn't, *mi corazón*."

Ayisha met the Spanish pirate woman on the third day after *Wicked Wench* was attacked, when Jack introduced them. The princess knew immediately, from the way she stood next to Jack, her arm brushing his, that they were lovers.

She was not surprised to realize this. The Spanish woman was aristocratic and lovely. She had beautiful clothes. Ayisha had one dress, the one she had worn the night she left Calabar. Whenever they'd had enough rain, Ayisha had sat on her bunk, wrapped in her sheet, while Tarek washed it.

Whenever it ripped, she'd mended it, over and over, but despite their best efforts, the dress was now bleached from the sun, irretrievably stained, and rapidly becoming threadbare.

The Spanish woman was also a ship captain in her own right, and could obviously do many things that Jack liked to do, things like fencing with a sword, steering a vessel, or plotting a course on a chart, then sailing away to exotic, distant lands.

The Spanish woman also undoubtedly knew the ways of a man and a woman together, alone, as lovers.

Ayisha knew how such a union was managed; she was not, after all, a child. But she had never even been alone with a man, other than her father or her brothers. Tarek, as a eunuch, did not count.

When the princess recognized that the emotion she was experiencing toward Lady Esmeralda was jealousy, she was horrified at herself. But she couldn't stop feeling that way, no matter how often she reminded herself that there had never been the slightest indication from Jack that he had any emotion for her except general liking. She knew he respected her magical abilities, and her craftsmanship with her needle; he'd made that clear. But that was all he felt, and the knowledge was a dagger in her heart.

Ayisha also knew he valued her because she was the wearer of one of the three magical talismans that would

allow him to enter the labyrinth. Despite his good qualities, Jack was like all other white men in his obsession with gold. All one had to do was mention “treasure” and they were willing to risk anything and everything—including their lives, and the lives of people around them—on the chance that they could find it and make it their own.

Seeing Jack with Esmeralda for the first time, only Ayisha’s royal comportment saved her from a shameful betrayal. After one dreadful moment, when she’d felt as dizzy as a climber clinging to a cliff by her fingernails and nothing more, she had swiftly masked her emotions, and smiled. She’d been polite and chatted with aplomb.

But after Jack and the Spanish woman had departed, arms still brushing, Ayisha had pleaded exhaustion to Tarek and lain down on her bunk. She was still there the next morning. She’d refused food and drink, and had risen from the bunk only once, to use the chamber pot. Then she’d lain down again, her back to the little canvas “room.”

At first Tarek had attributed her actions to having overdone things and not rested enough after expending so much of her energy to save the *Wicked Wench*. But by the next morning, when she simply shook her head and lay there, not replying when he offered her tea, or food, she knew she’d worried her bodyguard. Ayisha was sorry about that; ordinarily she tried to be a kind and respectful mistress to her servants. But she simply could not cope with what had happened. Her whole life as she knew it seemed to have flown apart, just as Borya’s ship had.

Shabako, too, came in and tried to speak to her. All she could do was shake her head and reply in monosyllables. He, too, left after a while, leaving her in solitude. Her loneliness hurt, but not as much as being with people.

By midday, she actually had dozed off, lulled by the gentle rocking of the ship, and the lovely breeze coming through the gun port.

But Ayisha awakened instantly at the sound of a certain footstep, then a voice that made her heart race.

“Ayisha? Hey, love, it’s me, Jack. Tarek says you’re sick. What’s wrong?”

She didn’t speak or move, but she knew she couldn’t fool him into thinking she was still asleep.

“Ayisha?”

She couldn’t decide what to do. Speak to him? She didn’t want to. But not seeing him was a thought that held its own terror.

Footsteps approached, and she heard a muffled thump as he knelt down by the bunk. Jack stayed that way for long moment, then he said, “I can tell you’re awake. What’s wrong? Where does it hurt? Should I fetch Esmeralda’s surgeon?”

The thought of that was enough to rouse her. Ayisha turned onto her back, and spoke. Her voice felt rusty, because her mouth was so dry. “No, no. I will be fine, Jack. Thank you. I am simply…tired.”

He raised his hand and touched her forehead, then her cheek. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

He had touched her. Her heart leaped, then sank. “I don’t have a fever. I am just tired.”

Jack sat down, cross-legged, beside her bunk. She’d seen him when he was tired, or bored, or excited, or amused, or drunk—but she’d never before seen him look stricken and guilty. Her heart contracted. What had she said to produce that?

“Why do you look like that?” she asked.

“This is my fault,” he muttered.

Ayisha sat up, then turned and sat opposite him, also cross-legged. “How could my being tired be your fault? It’s not your fault.”

“If my plan had worked, we wouldn’t have run aground, love. But like a bloody fool, I waited too long to drop the anchor. So we grounded on that shoal. And there wasn’t a

thing I could do to save my ship, then. *You* saved her, though. But it nearly killed you to do it. I saw you, afterward. You might have *died*. And now you're ill. My fault."

*It **is** your fault*, Ayisha thought, *but not in the way you think. I've fallen in love with you, and I shouldn't have. I have to go back to Zerzura. I have responsibilities. I'm a princess. And you're a commoner. Except you **aren't,** Jack Sparrow. I've never met anyone like you before, and I never will again. And after we reach Zerzura, you'll sail away, not caring, never knowing, and I'll stay there, and...and...*

She found her voice. "No, Jack. It wasn't your fault. I took a risk, and it worked. I was saving my brother and myself. And Tarek. And it's not like I sacrificed myself. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

Despite her best efforts, a tear broke free, and ran down her cheek. Ayisha hoped he wouldn't notice. "Yes," she said, steadily. "I'm sure. Casting the spell tired me, naturally, but I will be—"

"If you're fine, why are you crying?" he interrupted, albeit quietly. He put his hand up to her cheek, cupping it gently, then used his thumb to wipe away the little bit of moisture. The tenderness of the gesture completely undid her. She stared at him wordlessly.

"You were so brave," he said. "To climb up there in the middle of a battle, armed with nothing but a candle and some thread, with that sloop coming around for a broadside. I know how to fight, when I can't avoid it. But I've never done anything like that."

Ayisha looked down, leaning her cheek into his hand a little bit, then shook her head. "I'm not brave," she whispered. *I can't even face my own feelings, without hiding away, ashamed and terrified.*

"Yes, you are." Jack smiled slightly. "I promised myself that as soon as you were feeling better, I'd find you, and thank you from the bottom of me heart, most humbly, for

saving me ship. So, thank you, darlin'." Then he leaned forward, and some instinct told her he was going to give her a chaste, grateful kiss on the cheek, or possibly the forehead. She moved her head at the last possible moment, and his mouth touched hers, instead.

Ayisha was not in the best shape for her first kiss. Her lips and mouth were dry, and she was weak with hunger. But after the first moment, she forgot all about that. She wasn't really sure how one kissed back, but she relaxed her mouth slightly, and that seemed to work.

After a long, sweet moment, Jack drew away. He let his hand fall. He looked a bit dazed, which Ayisha could well understand, because she felt the same way.

Her hand flew up, two fingers covering her lips, to keep his kiss there, on her lips, as though it might somehow slide off. She was determined not to lose it. Jack misinterpreted her gesture; he ducked his head, chagrined. "I'm sorry, love. I shouldn't have done that."

Ayisha let her hand drop into her lap. "Why *did* you do it? And why shouldn't you have?" She thought for a second. "And what should I do about it?"

He smiled. "That's a lot of questions."

"Take them one at a time, then."

"Right." He raised three fingers, then bent one down. "First, I did it because you're a pretty girl, and I'm a man. Most men want to kiss pretty girls that they…like, and, um, care about. Especially if the pretty girl gets within kissing range. We don't always do it, obviously, but the impulse is there."

She nodded, intent on his words.

He bent the second finger down. "Second, I shouldn't have, because, even though you're a pretty girl, and I've rather wanted to do that for quite a while now, you're a *princess*, Your Highness, and if I'd done that when we were on Kerma, and your brother was so inclined, I suspect he

could have me head chopped off for taking such a liberty with his sister."

Ayisha nodded again. She could imagine her father's reaction to such a liberty.

Jack bent down the third finger. "Third, if you were an English girl from a noble or royal family, you'd probably be expected to slap the tar out of me, for presuming like that. Even if you were from a poor family, if you didn't like me, and didn't like what I'd done, that's probably what you'd do."

"I should *slap* you?" She stared at him.

"I'm afraid so, love."

"Have you been slapped before, is that how you know all this?"

Jack shrugged, then sighed and nodded. "Yep. It's happened before. More than a few times, actually."

"Oh." Obediently, Ayisha raised her hand. Jack seemed to brace himself, but he made no effort to turn away, or shield his face.

Ayisha leaned forward, and brought her right hand up to his face, then she patted it, feeling the roughness of stubble beneath her fingers and palm. She smiled at him. "There you go, Jack. Consider yourself slapped."

Jack laughed out loud, then he caught her hand and held it against his cheek. "Thanks, love. Best slap I ever got."

They smiled at each other, then she pointed to the jug sitting on the crate that passed for a table, and said, "Please pass me that."

He did, and she drank the watered ale gratefully.

"Actually, love, I came down here to deliver a message. I didn't know you were under the weather until I met Tarek up on the weather deck. So you may not be feeling up to going anywhere, but if you are, Esmeralda would like you to come over to her ship to dine with her. She's got an excellent cook."

Ayisha stared at him. What should she say? She found herself possessed of a great curiosity regarding the lady pirate. And anything was better than lying here on her bunk, feeling as though she wanted to die.

She nodded. “I don’t have anything to wear, but I suppose she would understand that.”

“She would, yes. She’s a real lady. You’ll like her,” he said, but there was a note in his voice that made her wonder how much he believed that himself.

“I’ll go,” she said. “Let me comb my hair and pin it up, and get my shawl, and I’ll come up on deck.”

“Good!” Jack said.

“Oh, and Jack?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me what you’ve told her. I don’t want to make any mistakes.”

He gave her an approving look. “Brave and *smart*,” he said. “I *adore* competent women. I told the same tale I told the crew, about you being a ‘Kermalayan.’”

“Does she know about…this?” She waved the shawl.

“She does,” he said. “You might want to keep your shawl on until the two of you are alone in her cabin. But you can certainly show Esmeralda your true face.”

“Very well. Thank you for passing along the message, Jack.”

When she reached the weather deck, a boat was waiting for her, with one of *Venganza*’s crewmen at the oars. Ayisha regarded the climb down the *Wench*’s boarding ladder dubiously, but she managed to hike her skirt up and do it, then step in and sit down without overturning the craft. In just a few minutes, they drew up beside the other ship.

At that point she had to climb back up *Venganza*’s boarding ladder, but she’d gotten the hang of it, and going up proved to be easier than climbing down.

The first mate, Luis Montoya, met her, introduced himself in accented English, and then courteously escorted

her to the captain’s cabin.

Ayisha stepped inside the cabin, and looked around in wonder. It was much different from Jack’s cabin. For one thing, the colors were tasteful, not garish. Beautiful rugs lay on the deck, and several tapestries hung on the walls. The furniture was antique, ornate, and polished to a mellow glow.

Lady Esmeralda was seated at her table, writing something, possibly a letter. She looked up as Ayisha entered, smiled, then held up one finger, signaling that she needed just a second to finish a task. Ayisha waited, and the lady folded the document, dripped wax onto the outside to seal it, and pressed it with a ring she wore.

Then she rose from her chair, smiled, and curtsied. “Your Highness. Welcome to *Venganza*.” She waved at the other chair. “Will you sit?”

Ayisha smiled shyly, and inclined her head. “Thank you, Lady Esmeralda.”

She walked over to the table and sat down, her shawl still around her shoulders.

The Spanish woman was wearing what Ayisha recognized, from her time among foreigners in Calabar, to be a simple afternoon frock. It was made of printed cotton, white with small green flowers, and had decorative green buttons. White crocheted lace accented the edge of the bodice, and there were rows of lace rimming the three-quarter length sleeves.

Ayisha smiled. “That is a pretty gown.”

“Jack tells me you are an expert seamstress, Your Highness.”

“Please, call me Ayisha.”

“Then you must call me Esmeralda.”

Lady Esmeralda checked the clock on her wall, and rose. “We have a little time before dinner will be served. Before I offer you wine, I have something to show you. Follow me, please?”

Ayisha followed the lady out of her cabin, and they descended ladders to the hold of her ship. It seemed to be filled with cargo. At the edge of the cargo area, there were perhaps twenty large, flattened cylinders wrapped in protective material that the princess recognized immediately as bolts of cloth. The tops had been opened, so the fabric itself was visible.

“I took a ship not long ago that had a cargo of fabric,” Esmeralda said. “Jack told me what happened to you, how you were captured by slavers, and thus have only the clothes on your back. When he said that, I realized I could help. So, Ayisha, please, choose whatever you would like to have from these bolts. Tomorrow *Venganza* and the *Wicked Wench* set sail for Savannah, where his ship can receive proper repairs. They have a large seaport there, and an EITC office. I plan to escort the *Wench* for a day or two, until we are sure all the temporary repairs are holding.” Esmeralda smiled, and waved at the cloth. “So, while you are sailing north, you can be sewing, perhaps?”

Ayisha smiled. “Thank you! You could offer me nothing better, Lady. I am so *tired* of this dress!”

“Small wonder, my dear! Choose whatever you need, and as many yards as you need. We’ll take your choices to my cabin, and you can cut off what you’d like to take. I’ll have it delivered to the *Wicked Wench*.”

Ayisha began wandering amid the bolts of cloth, eyeing the fabric, wondering what would be best. She could sew new clothes for her brother, and Tarek too. Finding a bolt of white linen, she pounced on it. “This one. I can make clothes for our homecoming from this.”

Esmeralda beckoned to a young crewman, who had been standing there so quietly Ayisha hadn’t noticed him. He picked up the bolt, and took it over to place by the ladder leading up from the hold.

Ayisha fingered the wonderful fabric on several bolts of silk. She pointed to the white one. “I can make something to

sleep in with the white silk," she said. "And then the white cotton, for petticoats and drawers—and shirts for my brother and Tarek."

Each time she indicated a bolt, the young crewman removed it and stacked it near the ladder.

"That's enough white," the princess murmured. "Perhaps I should pick out a color?"

"You are not used to wearing colors?" Esmeralda asked, curiously.

"My people decorate their clothes with color, but the basic fabric is usually white linen," Ayisha said. She tugged loose a swath of crimson silk. "What do you think, Esmeralda?"

"Lovely, for evening wear," the lady said. "For a young woman like you, I would temper the drama of the red by using it judiciously. A white underskirt and bodice, trimmed with white lace. If you wished to, you could embroider the white panels with some red. Lots of white lace ruffles. And some white lace overlay on the red silk."

"Very complicated," Ayisha murmured. "Difficult to visualize."

"I have some dresses you can look at for ideas."

"I would love that."

With a decisive motion, Ayisha added the crimson silk to the pile. Then she chose some cotton prints, green with yellow, pale gray with small blue figures, and rose with pale green. "Cool, for dresses when it is hot."

Ayisha hesitated over a bolt of gold satin, then put it back. "I would have nowhere to wear that." She did choose a bolt of heavier weight brown fabric, and a similar one of dark gray, then another of dark blue. "I can use these to make britches for my brother and Tarek. And everyday coats or waistcoats."

She stood and brushed off the skirt of her dress. "That's all."

“Are you sure?” The lady pirate laughed a little. “They cost me nothing.”

“I am sure,” Ayisha said.

The two women went back to the captain’s cabin. When they reached it, Ayisha, without comment, left her shawl hung near the door. She saw Esmeralda’s eyes widen, then the older woman simply nodded, but said nothing. The lady pirate walked around to stand beside her. “You’re quite a bit taller than I am, now.”

Ayisha nodded.

Esmeralda raised her skirts a bit, and extended her right foot. “Let me see your foot, dear.”

Mystified, Ayisha raised her own skirt and extended her foot. Esmeralda nodded. “I think I have a pair that will do.” She rummaged through a sea chest, then returned with a pair of shoes that looked fairly new. The heels were low, and they were plain in design. “I bought these, but they are a bit large on me. Try them on.”

Ayisha slid her feet into the shoes. She’d never worn shoes like this before. On Kerma, she had worn sandals, and then as a slave, she’d always gone barefoot. Moving cautiously, she walked around the cabin, gradually getting used to the shoes. “If you think you can wear them, please keep them, dear.”

“Thank you!”

After going through some of Esmeralda’s gowns so Ayisha could see the designs, they sat down to have a glass of wine. There was a knock on the door, followed by the appearance of a young crewman who brought in a large tray with covered dishes.

Ayisha was famished; she had eaten little since yesterday. The meal was, as Jack had promised, far superior to anything that had ever been prepared by the *Wicked Wench*’s cook. She enjoyed the bits of beef, cooked in a savory, somewhat spicy sauce. The beef was served with flavored rice, some unfamiliar type of greens, and yams,

which she knew all too well. Still, they were mashed, and drizzled with honey, and she ate every bit.

While they ate, Esmeralda talked about fashion, and some of the clothing she had seen worn in the court of Spain. Ayisha listened, nodded, and encouraged her to talk.

The last course was fruit, served with nuts and a delicious white cheese Esmeralda called *manchego*. The lady served it with a moderately sweet dessert wine.

Ayisha sipped it, and eyed her hostess. “This,” she said, gesturing at the remains of the repast, “was wonderful. I have not had food like this for…” She had to think. “Nearly nine months. Thank you very much for your hospitality, Esmeralda.”

“You are most welcome, Ayisha. Is that your real name, by the way?”

“Um, no. I gave a false name when I was taken. I was afraid that the slavers would try to make my people pay an exorbitant ransom. Is Esmeralda your real name?”

“It is, actually. Although Spanish names, particularly for the nobility, tend to be very long. One can grow tired, just trying to say them all in one breath.”

They laughed. Esmeralda poured herself some more wine, then topped off the princess’s glass.

Ayisha picked up an almond, then put it back on her plate. “So how long have you known Captain Sparrow?” she asked, trying to make the question casual.

Esmeralda smiled, and Ayisha had the feeling that she hadn’t fooled the Spanish pirate for a moment. “I’ve known him off and on for five years. We actually met as children, briefly, but that did not go well. I beat him up, I fear.”

Ayisha gasped, then nearly snorted with laughter. She managed to turn it into a giggle. “You didn’t!”

“I did. He was nine, and I had just turned fifteen. So I had an advantage in both height and weight—at that time.”

“He’s an interesting man,” the princess said.

“A gross understatement, my dear. Jack is an absolutely *fascinating* man. You’re unlikely to meet anyone else like him.”

Ayisha nodded. “He has a lot of faults,” she ventured. “He drinks too much.”

“Another understatement. But he’s always been like that, ever since I knew him. Lots of rum, lots of women. That’s Jack for you.”

“He has *awful* taste. That cabin…”

Esmeralda rolled her eyes. Both women burst out laughing.

The lady pirate refilled both their glasses. “My dear, Jack is absolutely *riddled* with faults. There are times when I’ve thought seriously of shooting him the next time I see him. But I never do….”

“What fault do you dislike the most about him?” Ayisha asked, after taking a sip.

Esmeralda nibbled her lower lip. “There are so many. Let me think for a moment.” She sipped wine, then said, “I suppose I would have to say the fact that I can’t trust him. I would never make myself vulnerable by counting on him to keep his word.”

“You don’t trust him?” Ayisha was surprised; she trusted Jack. Was she wrong to do so?

“No, I don’t. Oh, you can count on him in certain situations. If I had to fight a ship-to-ship battle against three or four adversaries, I would want Jack as the captain of the ship that was fighting alongside me. If I had to invade a fortress, and I wanted to make sure I’d get out alive, I’d have him at my side. If sword-wielding enemies surrounded me, I’d want him at my back. As long as Jack’s own precious hide is at risk, you could ask for no better comrade in battle. He’s a clever and experienced fighter—when he’s cornered. That maneuver he tried with Borya verged on brilliance, for example.”

“Except that it didn’t work.”

“True. But if it had, it would have been brilliant.”

“So in what instances would you *not* trust him?”

“If he asked me to lend him money, and I gave it to him, I’d do so knowing I’d never see it again. He’d promise to pay it back, and he’d mean it—but he’d never do it. I wouldn’t give him valuable jewelry of mine and trust him to return it to me six months later. He’d likely get into some kind of scrape and have to sell or pawn it. He’d be sorry, but it would be gone.” Esmeralda smiled a bit grimly. “And if he ever asked me to marry him, I would refuse him.”

Ayisha’s eyes widened. She’d wondered if the two were…promised. Hearing that they weren’t made her heart stutter. “You *would*? Why?”

“Because he’d never show up at the altar. No woman is ever going to tie Jack Sparrow down to home and hearth. He’s not that kind of man.”

Ayisha nodded. That one definitely rang true. “The sea is his woman. I don’t think a flesh and blood one could ever replace it in his heart.”

Esmeralda gave the princess a glance of mingled surprise and respect. “Very sagely put, Ayisha. And true as true can be.”

The lady pirate poured more wine. They sipped in silence for several minutes. Finally the princess asked quietly, “Have you ever wished he would ask you to marry him?”

“I did, for a while, when I first knew him. Then I realized that if by some chance I dragged him to the altar, he wouldn’t stay. Or, if somehow I forced him to stay, he wouldn’t be Jack any more. Who wants a sparrow with broken wings?”

Ayisha giggled. “*That* was clever, Esmeralda. As well as sage.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” The Spanish pirate giggled in her turn.

The princess looked over at her companion. “But you’re in love with him, Esmeralda. Aren’t you?”

“How could I not be? Jack charms every woman he encounters. He can’t seem to help it. He does care for me in return, I know he does.” She sipped her wine. “But I know pirates, so I don’t expect more than he can give. True pirates aren’t like other men.”

“But Jack isn’t a pirate.”

“He was.”

“I had figured that out,” Ayisha said. “But he’s not anymore.”

“Don’t you believe that for a second, Ayisha. Jack will *always* be a pirate. When he says he’s not one, it’s like…” Esmeralda thought for a moment. “It’s like someone who makes a dress out of muslin, and then convinces herself that it’s silk. From a sufficient distance, you might not be able to tell, but the moment you got up close, you’d realize the truth. And all the while she’d be telling you the dress is silk.”

“I see what you mean,” Ayisha said. “I haven’t known Jack as long as you, Esmeralda. And I acknowledge that you are right in many things, but someone I respect said that Jack is a good man. I think he was right. Even Jack may not know it, but I believe he is.”

“My grandfather, who raised me, said something similar,” Esmeralda murmured, thoughtfully. “Perhaps I’ve become a bit cynical.” She sipped her wine. “We’ve been talking about Jack’s faults, but he does have some good qualities.”

“Aside from being a good man to have at your back in a fight, what are they?”

“He’s a good captain. Knows ships. Knows the sea.” Esmeralda thought for a moment. “He’s funny. He always makes me laugh. That’s probably what has saved him from getting shot.” She poured more wine for both of them. “And,

last but not least, Jack certainly knows how to show a woman a good time. A *really* good time."

Ayisha frowned, puzzled. "What do you mean? I've never heard that phrase before."

Esmeralda looked away, and cleared her throat. She didn't reply, then Ayisha saw color rising in her cheeks.

Ayisha felt herself color, too. "Oh," she said, in a small voice. "*That*."

Esmeralda glanced at the princess's expression, then finished her wine. "Yes, *that*," she said, finally. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you haven't…hadn't…"

Ayisha shook her head. "No," she said, softly and a little sadly.

Esmeralda had spilled her wine. She traced circles in the blood-red liquid with her forefinger. "You'll make the right decision," she said, "or, rather, the decision that's right for you. You'll know if—or when—it's the right time."

Ayisha nodded silently.

Jack stood at the railing of the *Wicked Wench*, watching as Esmeralda's sailor rowed *Venganza*'s boat toward him. The middle watch had just begun.

Ayisha had been gone a long time. Jack had grown increasingly nervous, wondering what the devil the two of them were doing over there for such a long time. Having what Esmeralda called "woman talk," he supposed.

As the boat neared the *Wicked Wench*, Jack heard female voices, then a burst of laughter, then more giggles. He frowned. He'd wondered if there might be some sort of fight going on, but it sounded as though the two women were getting along famously. He didn't know whether to be glad about that, or disappointed.

Finally the ship's boat bumped against the *Wicked Wench*'s hull. Jack smiled as he saw Ayisha come over the side, then smiled again as Esmeralda joined her.

Ayisha seemed to be carrying a pair of shoes. She had her shawl tied around her shoulders. Jack strolled across the deck toward the women. “Good evening, ladies!” he said, being his most charming self.

The princess and Esmeralda looked at him, then at each other, and burst into fits of giggles. Jack halted in dismay. “What’s going on?” he asked, warily.

“Nothing,” Esmeralda said. “We had a lovely, lovely evening, didn’t we, Ayisha?”

“Oh, we certainly did!” Ayisha said. Jack realized that she’d slurred a bit. And, come to think of it, so had Esmeralda.

He stared at the women, nonplussed. “You’re both tipsy!” he blurted.

Esmeralda looked at Ayisha, and they both nearly collapsed, laughing.

When they finally were able to control themselves, they said good night, then hugged each other. Ayisha started toward the ladder leading down to the main deck.

Esmeralda waved airily at Jack, and headed for his cabin.

Jack hesitated, pulled in both directions, but finally decided Ayisha, being younger, made a better candidate for further questioning. He caught up with her at the ladder leading down to the main deck. “Better let me go first, love,” he said. “You don’t want to fall.”

“Thank you, Jack,” she said, and let him go first.

When she reached the bottom, Jack escorted her to the “door” of her “cabin.” “Good night, love,” he said, trying to figure out how to ask her what he wanted to know.

“Good night, Jack,” she replied.

“Oh, Ayisha?”

“Mmmm hmmm?”

“What did you two talk about tonight? You were gone a long time.”

She smiled at him. “You know!” she replied, and slipped into her cabin, leaving him standing there, outside.

Jack trudged back up the ladder to his cabin. Since Ayisha wasn’t talking, he was determined to question Esmeralda. But he found the lady pirate was already sound asleep in his bunk.

There are things man was never meant to know, he decided, and went to bed himself.

The next morning, Jack talked Esmeralda into fencing with him before she left for *Venganza*. It was good to have a really skilled opponent. Fencing with the lady pirate brought back a lot of things he’d learned, but hadn’t practiced enough. “You’ve been practicing, Jack,” she said approvingly, as they finished.

After they finished with their session, Esmeralda kissed him goodbye, then went back to *Venganza*. She would sail northwest with him for the next two days, to make sure the temporary repairs were holding. After that, he’d proceed on his own to Savannah.

He reached Savannah with all temporary repairs still in place, then sought out the EITC office there. After showing his bill of lading for his cargo, and explaining what had happened, the EITC office sent an inspector out to check over his ship and cargo.

After they removed the ruined barrels of sugar, the men in the EITC shipyard set to work on the *Wicked Wench*. When all of the holed hull planking had been replaced, the shipyard also repaired any jobs that had been too difficult for Jack’s ship’s carpenter to tackle.

Ten days after he’d docked at Savannah, Jack sailed out again, freshly restocked with food, water, black powder, and ammunition. But instead of heading due north, to stay on the Triangle, Jack headed almost due east toward Bermuda, following the pointing of Tia Dalma’s compass.

Now it's time for you and me to have a nice little chat, Christophe, Jack thought, clicking the compass shut. *Just a friendly little chat....*

About fifty miles south of Bermuda, Jack located his quarry. He sailed the *Wicked Wench* toward *La Vipère*, then hove-to about a mile away from the brigantine. He'd purchased black silk and white silk in Savannah. While on the voyage, he gave Ayisha the fabric, and pictures of two flags, asking her if she would please sew them for him. Putting aside the dress she'd been making, she'd stitched them up promptly.

Before he climbed into the dinghy, Jack ordered a puzzled Chamba to hoist the larger of the two flags Ayisha had made. It was the black Jolly Roger. The idea of a ship the size of the *Wicked Wench*, crewed by pirates that were almost as ruthless as he was, ought to give Christophe pause.

As soon as the dinghy floated free from his ship, Jack stuck the second of the two flags, which he'd mounted on a stick, upright in the little craft's bow. Then he began rowing. The skin between his shoulder blades twitched, as he imagined muskets being trained on his back from *La Vipère*'s deck. But he rowed smoothly and steadily. His plan would work, he was sure of it. It was always a safe wager that a pirate would give in to greed, where treasure was concerned.

His small flag snapped in the breeze as he rowed along. It was identical to the one now flying from the top of his mast—except that it was reversed. The skull and crossbones on his flag were black, against a white silk background. The flag wasn't used all that much these days; many pirates just used a white flag. But to Jack, raised with all the traditional lore by the Keeper of the Code, the white flag meant "surrender."

He wasn’t surrendering. He was there for a parlay. Jack just hoped that Christophe knew what the white flag with the reversed symbol traditionally meant to pirates.

Jack rowed, not looking at *La Vipère*, until he was within shouting range. Then he turned the dinghy so he faced the brigantine, and shipped his oars, letting the dinghy coast to a halt. The ocean was, luckily, relatively calm. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Jack shouted to the figures he could see on deck, “Ahoy! Captain Jack Sparrow here. Tell Captain de Rapièr that I request a parlay.”

He hadn’t brought his spyglass. Jack peered out from beneath the brim of his hat, but he couldn’t see Christophe among the figures gathered by the rail. Finally a shout came back across the water. “Ahoy! Captain Christophe grants permission for Jack Sparrow to come aboard, under protection of parlay.”

Jack shook his head back and forth, and cupped his hands again. “No,” he shouted. “Inform Captain de Rapièr that *my* terms for parlay are that he come out to meet me in a boat, unarmed. I am unarmed,” he lied. Unless Christophe was extremely observant, he’d never see the slight bulge of Jack’s pistol beneath Jack’s best coat. Ayisha had sewed straps and a slender pocket into the lining of the coat that suspended it so cleverly that it was almost undetectable.

The man was back on the railing. “Captain Christophe says he will receive you aboard his vessel, Jack Sparrow.”

Jack was getting tired of shouting. “That’s *Captain* Jack Sparrow, mate! You tell Captain de Rapièr this: ‘Jack Sparrow says he has the other two, and it takes all three to open the door.’ Tell him he has *five minutes* to get over here in his boat, or I’m heading out.”

Jack counted seconds in his head. He’d reached two hundred and forty when he heard the splash of the boat being lowered. A faint smile touched his mouth, but he didn’t even bother to look up as his erstwhile friend rowed over.

“Bonjour, mon ami!” Christophe said, as he reached Jack’s boat and shipped his oars. “Congratulations: they tell me you are now captain of that lovely big ship over there. It is a pleasure to see you doing so well. I must say, that is a very nice coat, Jacques.”

Jack looked up, and had to control his reaction. He knew Christophe was almost forty now, but he was startled by what a difference a mere five years had made.

Christophe’s features were still handsome, but it was as though some artist had wiped a cloth over them, blurring them a bit. He was still clean-shaven, but there were pouches beneath his eyes that hadn’t been there before, and a softness below his chin and jawline that was new. His nose looked redder, as though he’d been drinking more.

Jack cleared his throat. He did not respond to Christophe’s friendly greeting, or to the hand the man was holding out.

“Christophe, I know you’ve been searching for Zerzura, to no purpose. And now you know that it takes not one, but three talismans to open the door to the labyrinth.” Jack paused. “I’m the answer to your prayers, Christophe. I can get us to Zerzura, and then I can get us into the labyrinth. I have made contact with a native Zerzuran who has agreed to serve as our guide. What Captain Ward wrote turns out to be true. The labyrinth really *is* a maze, and it’s filled with monsters and traps for the unwary, both real and illusion. My guide can get us through to the Heart. All that’s required for you to get in on this venture is that you still have the pharaoah’s bracelet, and that you must agree to the conditions I set. Do you still have the bracelet?”

“Yes, Jacques, I still have it,” the rogue pirate said. “But, Jacques, cannot we go to my cabin and discuss this? Here we are, sitting in boats in the water. That is not the way friends talk.”

“Christophe, get this straight. This time around it’s *my* way—or *no* way. Savvy?”

“I confess I am surprised to see you, Jacques. Borya told me he had discovered that you were alive. A friendly warning, Jacques. He is hunting for you, and he means you harm.”

Jack shrugged. “I’m not afraid of Borya. Do you agree to my conditions?”

Christophe couldn’t conceal his surprise at Jack’s dismissal of the Russian rogue pirate’s enmity. But after a moment he shrugged, then said, “It is only fair that we be equal partners in such a venture, Jacques. I must—”

Jack interrupted the rogue by picking up his oars. “Very well, Christophe. If you don’t want to do things my way on this venture, I’m leaving. I don’t have time to play games. Farewell.” He unshipped his oars, and took a stroke.

“Stop, Jacques!” Christophe shouted.

Jack halted, then shipped his oars again, and waited. In a moment Christophe had pulled up beside him. Jack looked at him.

“Very well,” said Christophe. “I will agree to your conditions. I have already told you I have the bracelet. What else do you want?”

Jack ticked off his requirements on his fingers as he spoke. “One. Your bracelet stays on Kerma when you leave. Two. You are the only person aboard your ship who is permitted to leave your ship once we reach Zerzura. I have to keep the goodwill of my native guide, so I am not having any of your cutthroats going into the city and harming any of the citizens. To ensure that your men behave and don’t try to break our agreement, I plan to post armed men on my vessel to watch yours all the time, savvy?”

Christophe sat quietly, listening.

“Three. You don’t get bearings for how to get to Kerma. I know how to get there, so instead you will follow me there. Should a storm separate us, we’ll meet at St. Jago, in the Cape Verdes. If I get there before you do, I will wait for ten

days. If you're not there by then, I'll take my chances at blowing the door open with powder.

"Four. Neither you nor your crew is to come aboard my vessel for any reason, ever. Those are my conditions. If you abide by them, you'll get your chance in the labyrinth, to get as much as you can carry. I'll give you three minutes to decide whether you want in on this, under my terms."

Jack looked away from the rogue pirate and casually glanced under his seat. There was a bottle of rum there. Picking it up, he opened it, and had raised it halfway to his mouth when Christophe said, brusquely, "Yes. I accept those terms."

Jack nodded, then recorked the rum. "Very well. I'll give you half an hour to get your ship ready to sail east. Then I'm setting out. I'll see you in the harbor of Zerzura."

Unshipping his oars, Jack began rowing back toward the *Wicked Wench*, without a backward glance.

Ayisha spent the weeks of the voyage east toward Kerma sewing. She made clothes for herself, her brother, and Tarek, in the style of her homeland, using the bolt of white linen that Esmeralda had given her. She also sewed herself some new dresses from the printed cotton, trimming them with lace she crocheted herself, plus braid and buttons Jack had purchased for her in Savannah.

As the ship drew closer to Africa, Ayisha could feel the pull of her homeland growing, and she knew that when the time came, she would be able to guide Jack there. And, unfortunate necessity that it was, she would also guide Christophe de Rapièr and *La Vipère* there. The rogue captain had kept up with the *Wicked Wench* because Jack had intentionally slowed down so they could follow.

She and Jack talked almost every day, and at times he invited the three Zerzurans to have dinner with him.

Several times Ayisha caught him looking at her, and she could see a kind of hunger in his eyes. She knew, now, what that meant. He wanted her. The thought gave her pleasure, even as it scared her.

Jack knew what he wanted. What did she, Ayisha, want? She felt a growing urgency to discover the answer to that question.

The answer came to her one sunny morning, as she sat on the steps leading up to the quarterdeck, watching dophins leap alongside the ship, free as the wind. The reason she'd been feeling this urgency, this vague sense of foreboding was that Ayisha did not have long to live.

The moment the *Wicked Wench* broke through the fog-shrouding illusion, and entered the harbor of the Shining City, she realized, Ayisha would die. It would not be Ayisha who walked down the gangplank from the ship to the dock—it would be Princess Amenirdis. From that day forward, her life would be the life of Princess Amenirdis.

Ayisha, the former slave, was as wild and free as those dolphins. She could do as she wished. Princess Amenirdis was *not* free; she had responsibilities to her homeland, her people, and her family.

Spotting Jack up on the bow, she rose and descended the steps, and went to join him. "Jack," she said quietly, "how many more days of sailing before we reach Zerzura?"

"At least ten, maybe twelve days, love," he said, then smiled. "Depending, of course, on the wind."

"Our journey together is almost ended," Ayisha said, softly.

"It is," Jack agreed. "Soon you'll be a princess again, and I'll be nothing but the humble ship captain that brought you back home."

Ayisha glanced up at him in surprise as she heard him echo something of her own thoughts. She managed a faint smile. "Not humble," she said. "At least, not very often."

“You’re one of the few people that has ever seen me humble, love,” Jack told her.

It was the first time he had ever referred—even indirectly—to the time they’d kissed. Ayisha saw his eyes linger on her mouth, then move downward to the bodice of the gown she’d sewn from the rose cotton. “Another new dress? Very pretty, love.” He chuckled reminiscently. “I was getting quite tired of that old blue one.” The hungry look was there again, in the back of his eyes. It made her knees feel weak.

Ten days, maybe twelve, to live….

“I threw that one into the ocean yesterday,” Ayisha said. “I couldn’t stand the thought of ever putting it on again.”

“Good,” Jack said. He smiled at her again, seemed as though he might say something else, but changed his mind, and went striding off, to oversee some minor task.

Ten days, maybe twelve, to live….

What was it that Esmeralda had said? *You’ll know if—or when—it’s the right time….*

Ayisha looked out at the sea, thinking, thinking, and then feeling.

“It’s the right time,” she whispered, softly. “I want to live. I want this….”

That night, she put on one of the two nightgowns she had made for herself. One was for everyday, and was made of cotton, but she had made another from the white silk. Standing in the darkness of her canvas-walled “cabin,” hearing Tarek’s gentle snores, she worked by feel, sliding the silk one on.

It was a very simple garment, long, sleeveless, with a deep V neck. She had washed today, even her hair, and the strands curled around her fingers as she combed it. Picking up the old gray shawl, she pulled it over her shoulders, then went swiftly out of the cabin, and up the ladder to the weather deck.

There were so many stars in the sky that she could almost feel their light sinking into her skin, making the white silk of her nightgown luminous. Luminous to her, perhaps, but not to the crewmen on watch. A simple illusion had taken care of that, making the human eye slide away from her.

Ayisha padded across the weather deck, then turned and went between the two ladders leading up to the quarterdeck, to the door of the captain's cabin. Quietly she opened it and stepped inside, closing it behind her.

She heard a sound, from the bunk. Her eyes were well-adjusted to the dark. She could see the lightness of the bedclothes, and then the comparative darkness of Jack's upper body. She heard a metallic click, and realized it was a pistol being cocked. "Jack?" she said, hastily. "It's me."

"*Ayisha*?" He sounded incredulous, then concerned. "What's happened? Are you all right?"

She heard his fingers scrabbling again. "I'm fine," she said, taking a step toward him. "Don't strike a light."

Jack stopped scrabbling, and was still, very still. When he spoke again, his voice was different. "Why are you here, love?"

"I'm here because I want to be," she said, hearing a fierceness in her own voice. A hungry fierceness. She took another step, then a third, and then her legs, beneath the thin fabric, touched the side of the bunk.

Ayisha put out a hand, blindly, and touched the bare warmth that was his shoulder. She heard his breath draw in, as she ran her fingers along his skin. It was a very hungry sound.

We are both of us hungry, she thought.

"I can't see," she whispered, though that wasn't altogether true. "I need help, to find you."

"I'm right here, love," he said. His hand moved up, holding hers, then he moved his body sideways a bit, making room for her. His hand tightened on hers, and then

drew her toward him, until she was lying beside him, there in the dark....

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Chapter Fifteen
Kerma

Ayisha was sitting on a crate up on the weather deck, embroidering a colorful border onto the neck of the sleeveless linen tunic she had made for her brother, when a shadow fell across her work. She looked up to see Shabako himself standing before her. “Good morning, brother,” she said in their language. She held up her project. “See? I found embroidery silk in the color of lapis lazuli, and carnelian, and this bright yellow. You will not have jewelry befitting your station when we disembark in Zerzura, but you will not be unadorned!”

Her brother did not even glance at the colorful needlework. Ayisha shaded her eyes with her hand to see his expression. The weather was mild and clear—but a thundercloud could not have looked darker or more ominous than the young pharaoh’s expression. She lowered her hands, setting her work off to the side.

“Walk with me, sister,” he commanded, and turned away. Ayisha followed him silently. She’d rarely seen her father angry, but just now, Shabako had resembled Taharka more strongly than he ever had before.

Shabako led the way, down the ladder to the main deck, then down again, until they were standing together in the now considerably emptier cargo hold of the ship. No crewmen were present at the moment.

Ayisha forced herself to face her brother quietly, her hands at her sides. He had always been forthright and direct as a boy, and he did not play games with her now, but came straight to the point. “Last night, I could not sleep, so I came

next door to see if you were still awake and wanted to go up on deck with me and look at the stars, as we did when we were children, and our nurse nodded off. We would go up on the roof of the palace, and watch the heavens."

"I remember," Ayisha said, very quietly.

"But when I called your name, then struck a light, you were not in your bed. Tarek said you must have slipped out while he was asleep to relieve yourself, but I waited for an hour. You never returned. At first I was worried, thinking you might have fallen overboard. But then I realized that Tarek knew where you were—he just wouldn't tell me. I threatened to have him executed when we reached Kerma, and he remained mute. But I could tell he knew where you were."

He gave a short, sardonic bark of laughter. "Of course, Tarek would die for you without a second thought. I suppose it should not surprise me that he would also lie for you."

Shabako folded his arms across his chest, and fixed her with a dark, forbidding look. "Where were you, sister?"

Ayisha drew a deep breath, trying to think of what to say. She had never lied to her brother before. She did not want to start now. "I would rather not say," she said, her voice cold and formal. "The information is not your concern. It is private."

Shabako looked at her, and she could see him, forcing himself to keep his voice calm. "Sister, you were gone *all night*. Yet today you are cheerful and bright eyed. It is clear that you did not miss a night's sleep." He hesitated, then continued, his expression stony, "So where *did* you sleep?"

"I told you, that information is *private*," Ayisha said. She could feel her throat tightening; her face grew hot. "It is not your right to know."

"I am pharaoh. It *is* my right, sister, and I command you to tell me the truth."

Ayisha felt panic simmering within her. Soon they would reach Zerzura, and her brother's word would be law. If he

commanded his guards to execute Jack, they would do it, and there would be no recourse. *What should I do? Tell Jack not to go to the island, to land us somewhere else, where we could hire another ship?*

Ayisha bit back the urge to laugh, knowing the sound would be shrill, on the verge of hysteria. *Hire a ship? We have no money! We could not hire a donkey-cart, much less a vessel!*

And she knew Jack. Nothing would keep him from going to the island. They were so close. He'd never turn back.

Tears filled her eyes, and she dashed them away, quickly, ashamed of her weakness. She was frightened and angry—her control seemed to have deserted her. Setting her jaw, she stared silently at her brother.

The sight of her tears seemed to reach him, as her words had not. "Amenirdis," he said, softly, finally using her real name, "I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you." He hesitated, then said, "It is my responsibility to protect you, just as it is Tarek's. I…" He struggled to find words. "You are so young," he said, finally. "So innocent. Men of the world like that…they take advantage of young girls. I have seen his type before. He seduced you. It is not your fault."

Ayisha stared at Shabako, then—she couldn't stop herself—she laughed out loud. Stepping forward, she hugged him. "Shabako, little brother, you are so kind, so sweet, and I love you dearly, I truly do. But you are completely *wrong* in your conclusion. I swear by Apedemak that *I* went to *him*. I made my intentions perfectly clear. If anyone did any seducing, it was I."

Her brother was staring at her. His mouth hung open slightly. *I couldn't have shocked him more if I had sprouted an extra head*, she thought, and bit back an unnerved giggle.

Shabako closed his mouth with a snap, strode across the deck, stopped at the ladder, then about-faced and walked back. "*Why*?" he demanded.

Ayisha took a deep breath, and shrugged. “I fell in love,” she said. “I knew that we would not have much time together, so I made the decision to act on my feelings. I don’t regret that decision.”

“You *love* him?” Shabako said, clearly incredulous. “But…he’s *white*. Look what his kind did to us!”

Ayisha shook her head. “Shabako, evil has no color. Duke Wren-John, the slave hunter and trader, he was black. Remember?”

He nodded. “Yes…I remember. I would like to forget. But I probably never will.”

Ayisha nodded. She understood.

Shabako was looking at her. “Does Sparrow return your feelings?”

She shook her head, then she nodded, then she shrugged. “I don’t know. It doesn’t really matter. He cares, in his own way, I am certain of that. And it is enough.” She ran her finger along the edge of one of the barrels. “Soon we’ll reach Kerma, and it will be over. I will go back to my duties as a royal, and he will sail away. But I will have the memory.”

Shabako nodded. “I think…I think I understand,” he murmured, watching her hand move along the wood. “There was a girl at Wickhaven, the plantation….” He sighed. “She died last year. Childbirth.”

“Oh, brother!” Ayisha murmured. Tears came to her eyes again, and this time they were for him. “I am so sorry!”

He nodded, still not looking directly at her. “When it happened, I told myself that it was better that way. It was one way of escape. The child…was stillborn.” Shabako drew a long, painful breath. “I never even found out whether it was a son or a daughter. The Fenwicks didn’t bother to mark the graves of their slaves.”

Ayisha hugged him again, and this time, he hugged her back.

“When I am crowned,” he said, “my first royal decree will be to free Kerma’s slaves.”

Ayisha nodded. “I decided the same thing, when I thought the lion throne might pass to me.” She smiled at him. “And, just so you know, I am *very* glad that it will not.”

“You will be my heir until I get myself one,” he pointed out.

“Find a nice girl and marry her quickly, then,” she said, with a smile. Then, sobering she said, “It will not be easy, brother, to make such a sweeping change. It will take time, and work. If I were you, I would tell the people my intention, and set a date for the slaves to become free. Then work toward that date. That way the slaves will know they have that day to live for. They will accustom themselves to the idea of freedom, and taking responsibility for their own welfare. Where and how they will live, buy food, that kind of thing.”

Shabako nodded. “You obviously did give this much thought. Go on, please!”

“Setting a date in the future will allow the owners to adjust to the idea of paying their workers. This decree will affect so many things—the economy, marriage and inheritance laws, property rights—everything. If you announce a future date, give it perhaps a year, perhaps more, that will give you and your advisors time to study how best such progress can be accomplished.”

Shabako regarded her for a moment, then cocked his head to one side. “I always knew that my older sister was smart. I don’t think I knew how smart until just now. Amenirdis, when I am crowned, I shall appoint you my grand vizier.”

“But…that’s…no woman has…” she started to protest. Then she trailed off when he chuckled.

“And there have always been slaves, too. But that will change, and soon. A woman as grand vizier is a small change compared to emancipation of half the population.”

“That is true,” she admitted.

“So you will you accept the position?”

“I shall consider it, brother, and give you my answer—after you are crowned.”

“Have you ever been inside the labyrinth, Ayisha?” Jack asked. He lay stretched out, arms behind his head, looking up at the stars through the leaded skylight in the ceiling of his cabin. The crescent moon had set an hour or so before, so only the starlight provided illumination. Nights at sea were cool enough these days to be pleasant, with a breeze coming in through the stern windows. The evening watch on the quarterdeck had just signaled two bells.

Ayisha was lying with her head on his chest. She’d been drifting, content in the moment, and she didn’t want to return to the real world of miles sailed and irretrievable time passing. But she knew they must discuss this subject sooner or later, so, after a moment, she replied, “Just once. A long time ago.”

“What was it like, love?”

“My father took my brother and me inside with him. The high priest went with us, and he led the way. I remember the walls and floors, all built of pale, gray stone, very smooth to the touch. But the ceilings, they were different. I’ve never seen anything like them. We have nothing like them in the temple or the palace.”

“What were they like?”

“The ceilings were made from some kind of different stone. It was like quartz, but it gave off light. You could see without carrying a torch, which was a good thing, because the priests say fire will not spark within the labyrinth.”

“Torches don’t work?”

“No. It is part of the protective spell.”

“No sparks at all…” Jack mused. “That’s interesting.”

“Why are you—” Ayisha caught his meaning. “Oh! You’re wondering whether you could fire your pistol in there.”

“Right, love.”

She considered the question, then shook her head in the darkness. “I shouldn’t think so, Jack. Piye always said it just the way I repeated it to you. ‘Fire will not spark.’ It takes a spark to fire a pistol.”

“That’s right,” Jack said. “So we’ll have to rely on blades to overcome any…adversaries. Tell me more about your journey through the labyrinth. I want to know all that you remember, love.”

“I remember walking for what seemed a long time. The high priest chanted as we went. We walked, and walked… my legs grew tired, but I was proud of being a big girl, so I didn’t want to complain. Shabako began to fuss about being tired, so my father picked him up and carried him.”

“How old were you?”

“Seven, I think,” she replied. “Shabako would have been four.” She raised her head to look at him, though it was too dark to make out his features.

“In the Captain Ward book,” Jack said, “he reported that there were illusions and magical pitfalls put there when it was first built, traps that will bar anyone but the rightful users from finding the way to the center, where the Heart of Zerzura is located. Captain Ward said the stone rests on the outstretched palm of a life-sized golden statue of the lion-god, Apedemak.”

Ayisha nodded. “Your Captain Ward was correct, Jack. I wonder how he discovered all of this?”

“I have no idea. The author of the book claimed that he was a pirate for ten years, and maybe he was. It was published in England when I was just a little shaver. The pirate captains he mentioned in the book sailed the Spanish Main at least thirty years ago. One of the chapters in the book was titled, ‘Pyrate Lore and Legends of Treasure.’ I

read that part over and over when I was a boy, dreaming about finding it all, and being the most famous pirate ever."

The princess propped her head up on her left hand, and began trailing her fingers in aimless patterns across his skin. She smiled in the darkness. "I can picture you as a little boy, Jack. Full of mischief. I'll bet you were constantly getting into scrapes."

He laughed. "I caused me share of trouble, love. At any rate…none of the old-timers I ran across remembered anyone on the account named 'Ward.' But that's not unusual. Many pirates don't use their real names."

"Really? Is Jack Sparrow your real name?"

"As far as I know, it is. Never saw it ever recorded anywhere, of course." He shrugged.

"Where did you grow up, Jack? Who raised you?"

"I grew up here and there, love. My first memory is of climbing up the ratlines to the yardarm and seeing the ocean, all spread out. I was a cabin boy on many ships, visited lots of ports. And, of course there was Shipwreck Cove, which was as close to home as any place was. That's the pirates' secret hideaway. It's an island—you know the kind. One of those places that's very hard to find—unless you know where it is. And it's not always in exactly the same place, some of the old-timers claim. As for raising…" He chuckled a bit hollowly. "I more or less raised meself."

She could tell the subject wasn't one he wanted to discuss, so Ayisha dropped both her head and the subject, nestling a bit closer. "No wonder there was an instant bond between us, Jack. We both hail from mysterious islands that cannot be found by ordinary people."

"Hah!" His chest rose and fell beneath her ear as he snorted. "'Instant bond?' *What* instant bond? You bloody *hated* me!"

Ayisha kissed his chest, smiling. She moved her hand, running it down his side. "No, I didn't. The first time I saw

you, I thought you were quite good-looking…for a white man."

"You're trying to distract me, you minx, and don't think I don't know what you're doing," he said, trying in vain to capture her hand.

"It's working, too…." she said, kissing his shoulder, then his cheek, searching until she found his mouth in the darkness.

"You are an insatiable enchantress," he muttered, his arms coming up to pull her closer. He rolled them over until he had her pinned down. "You'll be the death of me, woman."

"You'll die happy…."

Some time later, when their quick breathing had eased, Jack murmured, "So where were we, love?"

"We were talking about the labyrinth, and what Captain J. Ward said about it."

"Right. I need to know about the labyrinth, love, if I'm going to lead a foray into it."

She sighed. "Yes. You need to know."

"Apedemak…he's your main god, right? Since ancient times, I suppose?"

"There are a number of lesser gods, but yes, Apedemak is special to us, and has been ever since my people left the city of Old Kerma in ancient Kush, just below the third cataract of the Nile. It was Apedemak that gave us the Heart, and told my ancestors to go west, toward the setting sun. They obeyed."

"You saw his statue. What does he look like, Ayisha?"

"He is the lion god. He usually appears as a man with the head of a lion, wearing the Triple Crown. When my father saw him in a vision, he saw him as a huge lion, though."

"What did the room look like, where the statue stands?"

"It's a big, circular room, and there are two doors. We came in by one, and left by the other. Stacked around the

edges of the room was the treasure. There were many piles of it."

"Ayisha, tell me more about the Heart. It's a magical stone—a source of great power, right? So what, exactly, does the Heart *do*?"

She raised herself up again, and her voice had gone low and intense. "Jack, the Heart is what keeps the people of Kerma safe. If the Heart was ever taken, or destroyed, we would all die."

"*Die*?" He sounded startled. "How?"

Ayisha drew a deep breath. "The Heart is indeed a source of power. Every day, the temple priests renew the illusion spells. They are very strong, you'll see what they're like when we get there. The priests perform the spells, they say the chants, but the *Heart* provides the power that makes them work. Without the stone, Kerma would be visible. Anyone could go there."

She clenched her hand as it rested on his chest. Ayisha could hear fear building in her voice. "And you know what that would mean! Cutler Beckett and men like him would be lining up to drag us off to the New World in shackles. They have guns. We have spears and bows and arrows. We would fight, but they would win."

He did not reply, but Ayisha could tell he hadn't fallen asleep.

"Jack," she said, urgently, "I know that you had to strike a deal with Christophe to get him to come to Kerma. I know you told him you could get him into the labyrinth. He's a pirate—he wants treasure. I understand that. There are centuries' worth of it, just sitting there. Letting Christophe have some as the price of getting my father's bracelet back is worth it. And you can have some too, though I know my brother plans to keep his word and reward you and your crew for freeing him. But the Heart…the Heart *must* stay with the god, in Zerzura, Jack."

"I understand," he said, after a pause.

“Do you?” Her heart was pounding.

Calm down, she thought. *Your father said Apedemak picked Jack, because he is a good man. Just keep remembering that….*

“I can deal with Christophe, darlin’,” he said. “He’s human, even if he is a double-dealing bloody snake. That’s not what concerns me. I’m just wondering about those illusions and ‘pitfalls’ Captain Ward’s book mentioned.”

“I can deal with the illusions, Jack, so don’t worry about them.”

“You’re not coming with us, love. It’s apt to be dangerous.”

“It will be a whole lot more dangerous if you don’t have me along!” she said. “Illusion can be very powerful, Jack. A strong enough illusion could lead you astray, even to your deaths. I know much more about this than you do.”

“I know you do.”

“Besides,” she said, “I’ll be the only one that knows the sacred word that will allow us to pass through unharmed. They say the elements of nature, Earth, Air, Fire, and Water will bring down a swift death for those who do not know the word.”

“What word is that?”

“I don’t know it yet, and I wouldn’t tell it to you if I did. Only a few people traditionally know it. The high priest of the god’s temple in Zerzura, and his successor…” Her voice thickened. “Piye is dead, remember? His successor, Nedjeh, will now become high priest, once I report Piye’s fate. He may already have been declared high priest. I’ve been gone almost a year.”

“So this Nedjeh, he would know the word?”

“Yes. And, of course, the pharaoh knew it, and the heir. So my brother must know it.”

Thinking of her recent conversation with Shabako, Ayisha sighed. “Talk about irony. Here I need Shabako’s help,

and for him to trust me—just when he thinks I've betrayed my heritage."

"What's wrong with your brother, love?" he asked.

"Shabako knows, Jack. About us."

He sat up abruptly. "How did he find out?"

"He came to find me late one night, and I wasn't there." She sat up, too, pulling the sheet up, resting her forearms on her knees. "Tarek doesn't approve, at least I suppose he doesn't, but he'd never tell on me. Shabako figured it out himself. I should have realized he would."

"Oh…" he said. He sounded wary, almost apprehensive.

"Relax, Jack," she said, and she couldn't help it—her voice had a bitter, sarcastic edge. "I was able to convince him not to have you executed the moment we reach Zerzura."

"Bloody hell! Did he really threaten—"

"No," she snapped. "He didn't."

After a moment, he said, tentatively, "Should I say anything to him?"

"No. We talked. I pointed out that once we're back on Kerma, I'll go back to being a good little princess, and you'll be gone. Shabako is a good man. He knows how hard it can be, to live the life we lead." She leaned her head against her arms, her face turned away from him, and sighed. "I'm tired. We should go to sleep."

There was a long silence.

"Ayisha…" he said, finally.

"Don't say anything, Jack. There isn't anything to say."

"All right, love."

They lay back down, not touching, and she closed her eyes, hoping for sleep. Her heart ached, but she did not allow herself to weep. There would be time for that later. *It's so strange*, she thought. *Human nature is so strange…and so greedy. Back when I thought he didn't care, I would have been wild with joy if he had just held my hand and smiled at*

me. Now, when I have so much more, I can't keep myself from wanting the impossible....

She could tell by his breathing that he had fallen asleep.

Ayisha lay awake, staring into the darkness. Finally, Jack rolled over and threw an arm over her. He was still asleep, but the touch brought comfort. She relaxed, and, finally, she drifted off.

* * *

Jack stood on the bow of the *Wicked Wench*, with Ayisha, Tarek, and Prince Shabako. *La Vipère*, as she had done for so many leagues, was sailing in the *Wench*'s wake, half a mile distant.

A dark gray smudge marked the southeast horizon. It was impossible to say just how far away it lay. It might have been two or three leagues, or two miles, or a mile. Or less. There was something *uncanny* about that smudge. It was difficult to make the eye focus on it. If Jack hadn't known otherwise, he might have thought the smudge was a distant bank of very low, dark clouds. Or the last remnants of a gale, heading off into the distance. Or perhaps even a low-lying ridge of rock, or a dark-colored sandbar.

"You're sure that's Kerma?" he said, shading his eyes and peering at it. "Looks like...a bank of cloud, or fog. Or maybe a sandbar."

"Yes," all three of the Zerzurans said, at almost the same moment. Then they looked at each other and smiled.

"Home," Shabako added. "I never thought I would see it again."

Jack raised his spyglass. "Jack," Ayisha warned, "I wouldn't do that."

But Jack had already looked through the eyepiece.

The spyglass magnified the smudge, making it seem quite close, less than a mile away. Up close, it appeared to be a fogbank, but no natural fogbank had ever looked like this. The fog coiled and curled, all shades of gray, with hints of color occasionally swirling through, but they appeared

and departed so quickly the human eye could not actually say what color, if any, lurked within the grayness.

Jack had never been seasick in his life, but peering into that cloud made him dizzy, and his stomach lurched. For a moment he felt as though he'd gulped half a bottle of strong rum in one long swallow, following a heavy meal—something he'd done a few times in his life, and lived to regret. Swallowing hard, he lowered the spyglass. His stomach heaved, and clenched. Jack gritted his teeth, and the nausea gradually passed.

"*That* was fun," he said.

"I warned you," she said, hugging her gray shawl around her shoulders.

"Next time, I'll pay attention," he promised.

"Jack," Ayisha said, "you need to warn the crew that they may feel strange, but that they won't be harmed, and the effects won't last. Going through the illusion will be far easier on this ship than it will be on the other, because I am aboard this vessel, and I can…muffle the effects of the illusion better for those aboard the *Wicked Wench* than I can for *La Vipère*." She smiled, and it wasn't a particularly nice smile. "*La Vipère* will make it through, but they may not enjoy themselves."

Jack nodded. "All right."

"When we sail through, Jack, I will need to be at the helm."

Jack looked at Ayisha incredulously. "No, love. It takes experience to learn how to steer a ship. It's not just turn the wheel and the ship goes where you want."

She shook her head. "No, I don't want to steer, Jack, I just need to stand beside the wheel, touch it with one finger. Will that be acceptable?"

Jack nodded. "Very well."

He thought for a moment about how dense the swirling grayness had been. "Do you know where we'll come out?"

“Not exactly, but we’ll be fairly close to Zerzura’s harbor.”

“How close? Are there rocks? Shoals?”

“No, not that close, Jack. Our fishermen have to be able to go out with their boats, so when the spell was first cast, the priests allowed for that. When my party left the island, we had to sail for two or three miles until we reached the illusion. It should work the same in reverse.”

After passing the word among the crew that they were going to be sailing into that unusual fogbank and that they might feel a bit strange, but would be safe, Jack went up to the quarterdeck. Ayisha came behind him.

He checked the traverse board, and looked at Lee Trafford, who was on the helm. “Hold her steady on course, Mr. Trafford. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Jack trotted down the steps, then turned and went into his cabin. Locating the correct course, he carefully marked the bearings on his chart, then entered them in his logbook. “There you go, Mr. Beckett. If I decide to give them to you, I’ll have them,” he muttered.

Before going back to the helm, Jack went forward, where Shabako and Tarek stood on the bow.

The gray fog was much closer. It seemed to be reaching out with curling fingers, trying to grab them. Jack wouldn’t have looked through the spyglass at it again for a year’s pay. Once had been enough.

He went back to the quarterdeck.

“We’re almost there,” he said. “Mr. Trafford, Miss Ayisha is going to be standing right here as we go through this unusual fogbank I mentioned.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” Trafford said.

Ayisha smiled. Since she was wearing her shawl, the expression wasn’t particularly pleasant, but by now the crewmen were used to her. Word had somehow leaked out that she’d cursed Borya’s powder magazine, causing it to explode, and thus saved the ship. When asked if that was

true, Jack had merely smiled enigmatically, and said, “If that’s so, I’m glad she was on our side,” and left it at that.

“Mr. Trafford,” she said quietly, “I am going to reach out and just touch the end of a spoke of your wheel, like this, for the next few minutes. I won’t try to turn it. I’m just going to touch it. All right?”

Trafford glanced at Jack, who nodded, and he, in turn, nodded at the woman. “All right, miss.”

Jack was standing on the port side of the quarterdeck. He thought that he’d be able to see the fog approach, by leaning to port a bit and looking past the sails, but it didn’t seem to work that way. One moment they were approaching, and the next they were in it, surrounded by grayness. The fog grasped them, curling its fingers around them, closing its hand so they were enveloped by it. For a moment, Jack fancied that the fog-fist would crush them. But…no. Whatever this grayness was—and it was *not* true fog—it was as intangible as the weather phenomenon it resembled. And, unlike normal fog, it was not wet. Jack reached over and touched the glass of the lantern, and it felt dry, not slick.

He soon learned not to stare directly into it, but to keep his eyes moving, not letting them dwell in any one place. It was eerie, eldritch, uncanny…all of that, and more. In addition to the grayness surrounding them, visible to their eyes, there seemed to be a faint hum in his head, an unpleasant drone that was occasionally pierced by muffled moans, or wails, or shrieks….

The worst thing about the sounds was that he kept thinking he recognized the voices—people that he had known, people who were now dead. For just a second he thought he recognized old One Tooth Tommy, but he could make out no words. He also thought he heard Pharaoh Taharka’s voice.

The *Wicked Wench* plowed forward, as Lee Trafford, white-knuckled, kept her on course, glancing down at the

binnacle every so often. Jack thought about asking Ayisha, standing motionless by the ship's wheel, one finger resting on the nearest spoke, how far they had to travel in this… stuff, but a look at her face and body convinced him that distracting her would be a mistake. She was rigid with tension, the cords standing out on her throat.

Jack had been keeping his eye on the hourglass, and Chamba, who had the duty of turning it. It took fourteen minutes for the sand to run through it, normally. When Jack watched the sand, it seemed to be pouring from the upper part of the glass into the lower part at a normal rate. But his perception of time was strange. He felt as though they'd been stuck in this hellish grayness for half an hour. But a glance at the glass told him that only seven or eight minutes had passed.

At the speed they'd been traveling before they'd entered the fog, that meant that in another two or three minutes, they'd have traveled a mile. How wide was the expanse of fog they had to cross?

Jack watched the sails. The *Wench* had all plain sail set, and the canvas was properly taut. There was wind blowing, the sails could feel it, and were heeding its push, moving the ship forward. But he couldn't feel the wind on his face, nor on his hand when he held it up.

He glanced down at Chamba, who was watching him. Jack tried to give the lad an encouraging smile. Chamba attempted to return it, but it looked more like a grimace of terror. Jack wondered what the former slave was seeing, and hearing. Worse things than he was, probably.

The last of the sand ran through the glass. Chamba turned it over.

Lee Trafford glanced sideways at Jack. The captain tried to give the helmsman a reassuring nod.

Hurry up, Jack begged his ship. *Hurry up and* ***end***, he ordered the illusion-fog.

He looked back at Ayisha, and suddenly saw her draw a deep breath and relax.

And, just like that, the fog was gone. It was like snapping one's fingers. One moment there, all around them, the next, simply…gone.

Before them lay perfectly ordinary blue water, under a lovely afternoon sky. In the distance, Jack could see the green of trees and vegetation, the gray rock of cliffs, and white specks studding the side of a tall hill. A low range of mountains appeared blue-gray from the distance.

Jack heard Ayisha gasp, and saw her expression—the look of a woman who was not sure whether to laugh or weep with joy. "Zerzura?" he asked.

She nodded, speechless.

"It won't take us long to sail into the harbor," Jack said. "You should go put on the clothes you made for your homecoming. And, Ayisha?"

She glanced at him. "Don't forget to take off your shawl. You want your people to recognize you."

Ayisha nodded, then she was gone, picking up her cotton skirts and making her way down the ladder.

He watched her hurry across the deck, thinking about their "talk" a week ago. At first Jack had been concerned about how Shabako might react to him, or Tarek, for that matter. But both men appeared unchanged in their demeanor toward him.

With part of his mind, he heard Robby down on the weather deck, ordering the crew to adjust the sails, as Trafford reached the mouth of the harbor, and, after a questioning glance at Jack, turned the *Wicked Wench* to approach the docks there.

Jack headed down the ladder to look behind them. *La Vipère* had made it through, also. Jack almost wished that Christophe and his brigantine had been lost in that hellish illusion-fog.

But if they had been, there'd be no way to get into the labyrinth now, would there?

Jack sighed, and wandered over to the railing. He'd read so much about the Heart of Zerzura, fantasized about it, thought about what it would be like to have something that would give him power and wealth. He knew full well that Christophe thought the Heart was going to be his. But Jack would be damned if he'd let the rogue have it.

But if I take it, Ayisha and Tarek and Shabako and all the rest of the people on Kerma will pay the price, he thought.

Jack leaned his elbows on the railing, staring down at the water sliding past without seeing it, his mind in turmoil. For years he'd put himself first, making bloody sure that he looked out for himself—because if Jack Sparrow didn't look out for himself, it was damned certain that nobody else in this world would. The few times he'd put someone else first, such as the time he'd saved his "innocent" friend Christophe from hanging, look how it had turned out.

Jack rubbed his stubbly jaw, thinking. Maybe he could take the Heart, but not give the EITC the bearings to find Kerma. Then Cutler Beckett wouldn't be able to find the island, and the people of Kerma would be safe.

A moment later, Jack realized what a ridiculous notion that was. His jaw tightened. Of course Cutler Beckett would come looking, with or without bearings! And without the illusions to conceal it, Kerma would be fully visible, ripe for the taking. He'd seen Beckett's face, the greed in his eyes. He knew full well the resources the man could bring to bear. Hell, the EITC had more ships than the bloody Royal Navy. He and Mercer would find Kerma, invade the island, strip it of everything valuable, then take any survivors and throw them into the holds of slave ships.

Jack had a sudden vision of Ayisha in rags, her lovely face terrified, being dragged into the hold of a ship by brutal men. They'd throw her down and snap rusty iron manacles,

stained with the blood of the previous miserable wretch, around those delicate, shapely ankles.

He shook his head hard, trying to drive that vision out of his mind, but he knew every time he closed his eyes, it would be there. Ayisha would be taken back across the Atlantic, and she'd be sold to some owner, and even if the man weren't a brute who'd lash her for fun, he'd still want her. Any man would. He might share her with his overseer….

Jack thought about the night she'd slipped into his cabin. She'd been scared, but resolute, determined to seize a bit of happiness for herself, after all she'd been through. She'd come into his arms trustingly, because she wanted to be there. It had been her first time, too….

Afterward, she'd lain in his arms, softly whispering to him in her own language. He'd a pretty good idea of what she was saying, but she hadn't burdened him by telling him in English.

"Damn it!" he muttered, clenching his first and slamming it down onto the rail. "Bloody hell!"

"Jack? Are you all right?"

He started at the sound of a familiar voice, and turned to find Robby there. A quick glance at their surroundings showed him that the *Wench* was gliding up to the dock.

Cradling his bruised hand, Jack stared across the docks, seeing the buildings of the city as they ascended the hillside, many of them round, others rectangular, none of them looking even faintly European in shape. Tall, pointed obelisks thrust up between the white stone edifices.

"It's beautiful," he said.

"It is," Robby said. "What was it you said the other name for Zerzura was?"

"'The Shining City.'"

"Pretty good description, I'd say," Robby said.

At the far end of the wharf, a contingent of armed warriors marched toward the *Wicked Wench*. They were carrying spears and shields and wore swords on their belts.

Another contingent of guards carried bows and arrows. They marched with military precision, tall, proud men, wearing armored bronze breastplates and skullcap helmets.

Jack thought about what just *one* broadside from the *Wicked Wench*'s guns would do to those precise, disciplined ranks.

He heard a loud male voice from behind him, speaking Kerman in tones that sounded like some kind of formal proclamation. Tarek's voice.

Jack turned and saw the three Zerzurans walking across the weather deck. Tarek came first, to clear the way. The prince and princess followed, side by side. Although their feet were bare, they walked proudly, clad in the garments Ayisha had made for them. Their golden bracelets shone on their right wrists. Amenirdis wore her gazelle earrings. Their pleated white linen garments were striking against their dark skin. Prince Shabako's sleeveless tunic and short kilt had bright embroidery on it, but those of Tarek and the princess were unadorned.

Crewmembers murmured in shock, pointing at Amenirdis, who appeared as her true self.

Lucius Featherstone and his new best friend, Etienne de Ver, braced to attention as she walked toward them, and as she drew even with them, they threw her their snappiest, best salutes. Smiling at them, she nodded graciously.

Jack stepped aside as the two royals and their guard walked up to the rail of the ship and stood there, waiting to be recognized.

The guards continued marching toward them. The man in the forefront, whom Jack took to be an officer, reached a point even with the bow of the ship. Then, suddenly, the man's eyes widened, and he stopped so abruptly his troops bumped into him.

The sounds of marching feet died away, leaving silence.

The officer made a peremptory hand gesture, and his men halted, arranging themselves in precise rows. The

commander strode forward alone, walking along the dock, until he reached the point opposite where the prince and princess stood, facing him across the short gap of water. He stared at them for a long moment, then suddenly he dropped to one knee, bowing his head and holding both arms away from his body in what was clearly a ceremonial gesture to a superior.

Jack let out his breath in a relieved sigh.

Several hours after their first meeting on the steps of the royal palace, Princess Amenirdis stood with her mother, Queen Tiyy, in the doorway to her own suite of rooms. Wrapped in a loose robe of linen, she had just come from her adjoining bathing chamber.

She looked around her at the outer room, the one that served as what the English would call a parlor. After growing accustomed to English homes for months, then the ship, her chamber seemed strange. Benches lined the wall. Low tables and stools sat on finely woven mats. The walls were whitewashed, painted with scenes of a pool containing colorful fish, surrounded by benches and trees. The columns that held up the ceiling were carved and painted to resemble lotuses. The door to her left led out onto her private courtyard, with its lotus pool, its palm trees, and low benches where one could sit and appreciate the flowers and plants.

The chamber behind her was the bathing room, and never had a bath felt so good, after so many months of having to wash in a basin. Amenirdis had stood on a block of limestone, as servants bustled back and forth, pouring jars of water over her. The water ran down the sloping floor, and out a drain. After they had bathed her, the servants had rubbed her body with scented oils, clucking over the roughness of her hands and feet.

It was difficult to believe she was really here. Amenirdis glanced at her mother and saw that Queen Tiyy felt much as she did. Smiling shyly, her mother reached over to touch her daughter's arm—a light, fleeting touch. The queen needed to touch her children, Amenirdis knew, to reassure herself that they were really there, and that she was not dreaming.

"Hurry, daughter, the homecoming feast begins soon. I will summon a handmaiden to help you dress."

Queen Tiyy clapped her hands. One of Amenirdis's waiting women, Sennuwy, hurried into the room, bowing and praising Apedemak that her mistress was home.

Amenirdis froze, as she remembered that Sennuwy, like many of her servitors, was a slave. She found herself unable to meet the woman's eyes.

"Hurry and dress your mistress, girl," the queen commanded. "Paint her face. Make sure she wears her good sandals with the golden beads. And the golden girdle for her dress."

Sennuwy began bustling around, fetching Amenirdis's clothing, the kohl for her eyes, the pins and woven band to confine her own hair beneath her formal wig with its many gold and colored beads.

Queen Tiyy ignored the presence of the slave as she gestured at the chamber. "I knew you would return, daughter. You promised you would, and you have never broken your word. I just did not think it would be so long. But I never lost hope. I never lost faith. Everything is exactly as you left it."

Amenirdis nodded. "Many things happened to delay me, Mother, as I searched for my brother."

"I listened to the two of you today and could scarce believe what I was hearing, my daughter!" the queen exclaimed. "Captured and sold into slavery! Your brother, too! What you have been through—I cannot even imagine it. And to discover the fate of your father—how can the gods have received his spirit without the proper rites? We must

have a memorial. But how can we, with no body?" The queen wrung her hands.

"I believe the gods will understand, Mother," the princess said. "We will simply explain to our people that father was lost at sea." Shedding the loose bathing robe, she raised her arms so Sennuwy could slip her gown over her head. The slave indicated the princess should sit on a low, backless stool to have her sandals laced on.

Once she was shod, Amenirdis stood again, arms held out, as the slave placed the golden girdle around her slender form and clasped it. Her white linen garment was elaborately draped and pleated—far more so than the simple one she had sewn aboard the *Wicked Wench*.

The slave indicated the dressing table, and the princess walked over to it and sat down. Only her private knowledge that Sennuwy would, in the fullness of time, be free enabled her to accept these services from the woman. She smiled at her, murmuring "thank you," startling the poor girl so much she nearly dropped the heavy wig.

Amenirdis felt the wig weigh her head down as the slave adjusted it. Far longer than her own hair, the elaborately decorated black strands reached below her shoulders. It had been so long since she had dressed like this that she had forgotten how heavy the wig was.

Obediently, she closed her eyes as the slave took out the containers of kohl to line and shadow her eyes. "I don't see why you wanted to invite those outlanders to the feast," Queen Tiyy fussed. "They are so strange looking! Their clothes! Their skin! Ugly!"

"Jack and Robby and Chamba helped save me and Shabako, Mother," Amenirdis said, her voice clipped. "They are our guests tonight, and we will give them all honor."

The queen looked surprised at her daughter's unaccustomed flash of temper. "Of course," she murmured. "Of course. I am sorry, daughter. I am just in a dither, hardly knowing what I am saying."

“I understand,” Amenirdis replied, after Sennuwy finished rouging her lips. “It has been a strange day for all of us.”

“Done, Your Highness,” Sennuwy said. “Let me fetch your jewelry.”

Amenirdis sat still as the woman clasped a bracelet on her left wrist, then an armlet around her upper arm. The gold, lapis, carnelian, and silver necklace, with its enameled pectoral, followed. The slave held up long, heavy gold earrings, but the princess shook her head and touched the gazelle ones, her father’s gift. “I will keep these.” Sennuwy handed her several elaborate rings, and the princess slipped them on.

A moment later, seeing Sennuwy approach with the heavy, formal crown featuring a crescent held by two stylized ram’s horns, Amenirdis shook her head. “Not that one. It will make my head ache, Sennuwy. Just the slender gold circlet with the jeweled uraeus, please.”

The woman gave her another surprised glance as she darted off. *Was I so rude, before?* Amenirdis wondered*. Did I treat those who waited on me like* ***things****, rather than people?*

Her people did not have mirrors like the beautiful clear ones that hung in Mr. Beckett’s house. But a large sheet of polished brass was mounted on the wall. Crown in place, Amenirdis regarded herself. A beautiful stranger stared back at her. A royal princess of Zerzura.

Ayisha is truly dead, she thought, sadly.

* * *

Jack took some time to get his crew settled in for the evening. Shabako had promised him that the crew of the *Wicked Wench* would be permitted supervised shore leave in Zerzura, starting on the morrow, so long as the sailors slept aboard their vessel. Jack had rowed over to *La Vipère* after the prince and princess had departed, and had waved his parlay flag at the brigantine.

This time, he didn’t have to argue or convince Christophe to meet with him on neutral territory. The rogue pirate had a boat lowered immediately, and rowed over to join him.

“What was that we sailed through, Jacques?” he asked. “It was some kind of sorcery, wasn’t it?” His voice was steady, but there were lines on his face that Jack didn’t remember seeing before, and his eyes looked hollow in his face. If Jack had heard the voices of the dead as they passed through the fog-illusion, what had Christophe seen and heard, after all the slaughter he’d committed? No wonder he appeared shaken.

“Yes, it was magic. Very strong magic. That fog stuff was the illusion that protects the island,” Jack replied, shortly. “Listen carefully, Christophe. I’m not going to repeat myself. Anchor *La Vipère* here in the harbor, and you and your men *stay aboard her*. If any of your crew of cutthroats goes ashore, our whole deal is off, savvy? So control your men.”

“I understand. When do we go into the labyrinth?”

“My contact needs tomorrow to prepare,” Jack said. “I believe we’ll go early the day after tomorrow. If there’s any change from that, I’ll row over and let you know. Otherwise, I’ll come for you in a boat at dawn, savvy?”

“I understand.”

“And, Christophe, just in case your men get any ideas about going on a little unauthorized shore leave, let them know that my crew will be watching them. I have a couple of sharpshooters in my crew that can—and will—pick off anyone that launches a boat. I’ve ordered them to shoot to kill, so you are fairly warned. Savvy?”

“Yes,” Christophe said.

The French pirate wasn’t arguing or trying to charm Jack anymore, for which Jack was grateful. It was all he could manage to be businesslike with the rogue. “Good,” Jack said. “And, speaking of firearms, my contact told me that pistols will not fire in the labyrinth.”

Christophe opened his mouth. Jack raised a hand to forestall his question. “Don’t ask me why, because I don’t know. It’s part of the magic. So come armed with your sword only. I’ll bring any equipment my contact indicates we’ll need.” He paused for a moment, then added, “And, of course, bring the bracelet.”

“I understand.”

“Very well.” Jack picked up his oars.

“You wouldn’t want to come aboard for a drink, would you, Jacques?” Christophe was looking at him hopefully. “I must admit, I have missed the old times we shared. Can’t we let the past belong to the past?”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “No, I wouldn’t care for a drink, Christophe. Now row yourself back to your ship. That warning about the sharpshooters applies to you, too, make no mistake.”

“Ah, but Jacques, if your men shot me dead, I might fall in to the water, wearing the bracelet, and what would you do then, eh?” Christophe said, doing a good imitation of his old cheeky grin.

“I’d just wait a couple of extra days for your body to rise to the surface, then I’d cut the bracelet off your swollen corpse,” Jack said, coolly, though anger bubbled inside him. This time around he hadn’t brought his pistol, and that was probably for the best, he decided, because if he had, he’d have used it right then. “I’ve handled corpses before. I was the one that found Tommy after you murdered that harmless old sot, savvy? At any rate, I’m leaving now, Christophe. You’d better be back aboard *La Vipère* by the time I reach the deck of my ship.”

Christophe grabbed his oars and began to row, making good time.

After Jack reached the *Wicked Wench*, he went into his cabin and poured himself a stiff jolt of rum, then forced himself to sip it slowly, rather than tossing it back. That helped.

A short while later, there came a tap on the door. “Who’s there?”

“Robby, and Chamba’s with me.”

“Come in.”

The first mate entered, with Chamba on his heels. He held out a stiff piece of parchment-like material to Jack. “We’ve got an invitation.”

“From whom?”

“The queen, ostensibly, though obviously Ayisha must have written it.”

“I didn’t know she could write English,” Jack said, impressed. “You taught her to write, as well as read, Chamba?”

“Yes, Cap’n.”

Jack fingered the document, as he read it. “This must be papyrus,” he said. “All right, lads, Tarek will come down to the ship to fetch us by sunset, to escort us to this homecoming feast, so we’d better get ready. Chamba, do you have a coat, or a waistcoat, you can wear?”

“No, Cap’n. But don’t worry. His Highness, Prince Shabako, he told me ’bout this earlier, said there was sure to be some kind of celebration when he got home. He said he be sending me some clothes for tonight. He got lots, he said. Remember, we be about the same size.”

“Well, I guess you’re all taken care of, then,” Jack said. “You became friends with the prince during our voyage?”

“Yes, Cap’n, we did. He’s been teachin’ me to speak his language.”

“You speak Kerman? Or is it Zerzuran? Good, because we’ll need someone to translate for us tonight.” Jack glanced at Robby. “I suppose we’ll be stared at as though we’re in a wild beast show.”

Robby looked rueful. “I was just thinking that.”

Jack stood up. “I guess we’d better get ready, then.”

Jack hurried through his preparations, so he was up on the weather deck of his ship, washed, shaved, combed, and

wearing his best, at least thirty minutes before sunset.

While he waited, he paced the deck of the *Wicked Wench* restlessly, thinking about the labyrinth that awaited him. He hoped Ayisha—no, *Amenirdis*, now—would be able to find out that sacred word, whatever it might be. He didn't fancy having to tangle with the kinds of creatures that tended to inhabit magical labyrinths. Finally he slowed down, then stopped, running his fingers absently over the embroidery on the cuffs of his coat. Damn it all, he missed her, and she'd been gone only a few hours. The thought of sleeping alone tonight, after the feast, was depressing.

Robby joined him as he stood at the rail, watching the sun sink. His first mate had carefully brushed his best coat and hat. His blond curls were tied back, and his face was scrubbed and freshly shaved. Jack gave him an approving nod. "Very nice, Robby. I don't think we'll disgrace jolly old England."

Robby laughed. "Whoever could have predicted we'd be here, getting ready to eat dinner with royalty that have lived on this island, as their ancestors lived, since long before Our Lord was born?"

"*Your* lord, Robby," Jack reminded him.

His first mate smiled. "Any time you want to borrow my Bible when you run out of reading material, just say the word, Jack."

"Thanks, but no thanks, mate. I'd rather spend me leisure time, as little as there is of it, thinking about what I'm going to buy with my share of what Prince Shabako gives us—as well as anything I can carry out of the labyrinth."

"What will be the first thing you buy?" Robby asked. "I'm betting I know."

"Go ahead, guess," Jack said.

"We're standing on it," Robby said. "You'll try to get Mr. Beckett to sell you the *Wicked Wench*."

“You know me too well, mate.” Jack glanced at the lowering sun. “It won’t be easy. I’ll have to do it through a solicitor, I expect. Set up some kind of fake shipping company or something. Beckett certainly won’t want to sell her to me when I come back from Zerzura, telling him I never found Kerma, and that I don’t have the bearings to the island.”

“Is that what you’re planning to do, Jack? Lie to Beckett?”

“The thought has crossed me mind, Robby,” Jack said, lightly. “Mr. Beckett rather rubbed me the wrong way, last time we spoke. He made some threats. I don’t like threats.”

“But Jack,” Robby said, and there was suddenly fear in his blue eyes, “you’ll have to give him the bearings. You can’t just lie to a man like Beckett and expect him to swallow it.”

“I’m a pretty convincing liar, Robby,” Jack reminded him.

“Yes, but Jack, you’re not the only one who knows the bearings. Frank and I can navigate. Not as well as you can, but we manage. I doubt I could lie convincingly to Beckett, Jack. And with that thug Mercer standing by…” He shook his head and swallowed. “I wouldn’t even try.”

“I know. And no matter what I decide to do, Robby, I’ll not expect *you* to lie. Or Frank, either. Not to Beckett, and certainly not to Mercer. That brute scares me, too, with those black gloves.” Jack shrugged. “I’m not sure how it will all work out, Robby. But I trust Amenirdis. We discussed this problem, and I told her my concerns about Beckett and Mercer.”

“What can she do about it? No illusion will help this, and she can’t blow them up—can she?” Robby stared at him doubtfully.

“No,” Jack said, with a wry smile. “Though it would be handy if she could, wouldn’t it? I can’t tell you exactly what she’s planning, but she swore to me, by her god, that

neither you, nor Frank, nor any other crewmember would suffer or come to harm because they rescued her or Shabako or Tarek. I have no idea how she plans to arrange this, but I believe her, mate."

Robby considered this. "All right, Jack. After seeing what she did to Borya's ship, I have considerable trust in the lady too."

Jack nodded. "It's possible Beckett will fire me. And if he does, Robby, I'll be glad to see the last of Calabar. When I first met Cutler Beckett, I thought he was such an upstanding gentleman." He shook his head. "In his own way, Beckett's as bad as Borya. He just does it all without getting his hands dirty."

"I'm surprised he let you sail off without sending Mercer along, to keep you in line," Robby mused.

"I think he *did* send someone to report to him, Robby."

Robby thought for a moment. "Newton? The carpenter's mate who showed up so conveniently?"

"Yep. I wondered about him from the beginning, but I really began to wonder when I noticed that every time the man went on shore leave, he was posting letters. It's always possible Newton was writing to his mum, I suppose, but I've never yet met a sailor that wrote to his dear old mum from *every* port of call."

"If my mum was still alive, I'd send her letters from every port, Jack."

"Robby, mate, don't take this wrong, but you're…not your run-of-the-mill sailor."

"True. Getting press-ganged isn't the same thing as choosing a profession. Before that happened, I'd always figured I'd be a farmer, like my dad. I liked the farm."

Jack shuddered. "No offense, Robby, but I'd rather be keelhauled than live in one place, mucking out cow byres and staring at the stern of a bloody ox while wrestling a plow through the mud from dawn till sunset."

Robby chuckled, as did Jack. This was an old dispute, one they'd hashed over many times, without reaching any solution other than to agree to disagree. "If you want the *Wicked Wench*, Jack, you'll figure out a way," the first mate said. "You've loved this ship since the first moment you saw her. I've never seen you look at a woman the way you look at her."

"She's a good ship, Robby," Jack said, running a finger along the railing, as though the wood were soft, yielding flesh.

Robby smiled. "I think you and the *Wench* were meant to be together, Jack. One of those pairs people say in the same breath. Like…Adam and Eve. King Arthur and Excalibur. Robin Hood and Maid Marian. Jack Sparrow and the *Wicked Wench*."

Jack looked at him in surprise. "What a romantic, Robby! Never knew you had it in you. Before you know it, you'll be writing ruddy poetry."

Robby shrugged. "Some things are just obvious, Jack. The *Wicked Wench* is like your pearl of great price."

"Pearl?"

"It's from the Bible, Jack. A parable Jesus told his disciples, about a merchant who saw a perfect pearl, the most wonderful, beautiful one in the whole world, but very costly. The merchant had to have this thing that was so perfect, so he sold everything he had so he could possess it. It's in the Gospel according to Matthew."

Jack took a long look at the ship, from bow to stern, then he nodded and smiled at his friend. "By Jove, I know just how the chap felt, Robby. Most of the Bible stuff you tell me about doesn't make much sense to me, but this story does. A pearl of great price…that's this ship, to me."

Robby shook his head, slowly. "No…no, Jack. That's not what the story means. It's a *parable* about how one gets into Heaven."

Jack waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t ruin it, Robby. I like the story! First Bible story you ever told me that I liked. Be happy, mate.”

“But, Jack—”

“Chamba!” Jack exclaimed. “Look at you!”

Robby turned. Chamba came across the deck toward them. He wore a finely tanned leather kilt, pale golden in color, with a long-sleeved tunic made of linen, embroidered with blue thread. A pleated blue mantle covered his right shoulder, hanging below his waist, which was cinched with a broad belt, decorated with copper and gold. A wide collar of finely worked links of gold and copper hung around his neck. On his head he wore a closely fitting cap.

“How do I look?” Chamba asked.

“You look like the prince,” Robby said, simply.

“These are his clothes,” Chamba said. He looked down at the kilt a bit dubiously. “You sure I don’t look strange?”

“You look great,” Jack said. “We’re the ones that are going to look strange. You’ll fit right in.”

“Here’s Tarek, come to get us,” Robby said.

They walked up the hill as evening fell, along streets paved with stone. Some of the circular houses with roofs like flattened cones bordered their way, and they could glimpse gardens and plantings behind them.

As they walked, the buildings grew larger and became rectangular. Tarek pointed to an imposing three-storied one. “The Temple of Apedemak. I was a temple guard, before I became bodyguard to the princess.”

Jack stared at the group of massive white stone buildings, linked by covered porticos. The temple complex was composed of rectangles, some spreading out along the ground, others going up into the air. An enormous gateway stood before it. “Impressive,” the captain said. *And beneath those buildings*, he thought, *is the labyrinth…and the treasure….*

Past the temple, toward the top of the hill, another large rectangular building stood, perhaps half the size of the huge temple. Carved white columns supported an overhanging, flat roof. Tarek pointed to it. “The royal palace.”

Next to the rectangular building stood another, low, circular one. It appeared to be made of whitewashed brick, rather than stone. Tarek indicated it. “That is the old palace, which was kept to house many of the guards and servants.”

“Do you live there?”

“No, I sleep in the palace itself, in the antechamber of the princess’s bedchamber. So I will be able to defend her in case of attack.”

Jack sighed. *Forget trying to sneak into the royal bedchamber tonight....*

When they entered the palace, Tarek led them up several series of ramps. They emerged onto the broad roof, which was taken up with large, scattered cushions, woven mats, low stools, and small, low tables. A waist-high wall enclosed the roof area, and benches ran along it.

There was a crowd of people already present, excitedly chattering away. As Jack, Robby, and Chamba entered, the buzz of conversation ceased, as all the guests and not a few of the bustling servitors stopped what they were doing, turning to stare at them. The moon shone overhead, half full, and torches flickered at the tops of tall metal stands.

“Please, forgive their lapse in manners,” Tarek said softly. “They have never seen white persons before.”

Jack glanced sideways at Robby. “Bring in the wild beasts,” he muttered.

After a long, uncomfortable minute, the other guests seemed to recall that they were staring. They abruptly turned away and resumed talking, all the while stealing surreptitious glances at the newcomers.

Jack smelled roasting meat, and his stomach rumbled. “How soon do we eat? I’m a bit peckish.”

“As soon as the…” Tarek paused, then addressed a quick question to Chamba, who murmured a reply. “…the butler announces the arrival of the royals, we shall be seated, and as soon as the royals take their seats at the head table, the food will be served.”

“Any chance of getting a drink?” Jack said, looking around for a barkeep of some kind.

“I will see what can be arranged,” Tarek said. “Wait here.”

Soon enough, he was back with a bottle and three cups. Jack examined the cup. It was fired red pottery, marked with a black line. It was beautiful ware. Tarek poured for the three of them. It was a heady, dark wine, not too sweet. Jack sipped appreciatively.

Guests continued to arrive, and everyone had to stop and gawk for a moment at the strangers. After his first cup of wine, Jack started raising his cup in a smiling toast to those who stared, which inevitably made them look down and scurry away.

“You’re incorrigible,” Robby whispered.

Jack shrugged. “Can’t help it, mate.”

At long last, the “butler” called out an announcement in loud tones, and Jack caught the names of the royal family. Their little party headed toward the tables. “Where do we sit, Tarek?” Jack asked.

“The princess told me where to seat you, and asked me to apologize for her that she cannot sit with you. Follow me.”

Tarek led them to one of the rows of tables, not far from the head table. Jack craned his neck, wondering where the princess was, but he couldn’t catch a glimpse of her.

They sat at the low tables, cross-legged on cushions. Only after the other guests had stopped milling around and taken their seats did Jack get a good view of the head table, and the royals who stood near the wall, waiting. At a nod

from the master of ceremonies, they approached their seats.

He saw Shabako, and Queen Tiyy, and—

Amenirdis? Jack's eyes widened.

She was beautiful, but not beautiful like the girl he'd held in his arms just last night. That girl had been warm and alive, by turns laughing and passionate and pensive. This girl was every inch a princess, from the crown on her elaborate wig down to her elegant sandals. She was like a beautiful painted doll that had been given the ability to move on her own. Lovely, graceful, and elegant, yes, she was all those things. But her painted mouth did not smile. She appeared as remote as the moon.

Jack turned as he felt Robby bump his arm. "Look at that necklace the princess is wearing, Jack," the first mate whispered. "There's enough gold just at that table to buy the *Wicked Wench*."

Jack gave him a quick, baffled glance. "What are you getting at? I should steal it?"

Robby blinked. "No! I've just never seen anything so… rich."

Jack chuckled. "Look around us, Robby. They're *all* wearing more than we make in a year."

At long last, a servant came by and placed a plate before him. Jack watched the other guests, studying what was considered proper manners. Surprisingly, the Zerzurans hadn't developed spoons or forks. Each person had his or her own knife, to cut food with, and luckily, Jack had his sailor's knife with him. Once the food was cut, it was scooped onto pieces of rather spongy bread, which the guests then rolled up and ate.

Jack sampled the fare, and decided that Zerzuran cuisine compared well with others he'd tried all over the world. Some of the flavors didn't appeal to him, but most of the food was quite tasty. Servitors circulated, offering assorted dishes: different kinds of roasted and barbecued

meats, delicate fish steamed in large leaves, some kind of greens Jack had never encountered before, honey and spices sprinkled over roasted yams…the dishes just kept coming, all of them served on that beautiful, delicate pottery. Wine servitors came around every so often, pouring wine out of vessels with spouts molded to resemble animal heads.

They were halfway through the meal before any of the other guests got up enough nerve to speak to Jack, though Chamba had been chattering away since they'd first sat down. His closest neighbor, a young man who wore the skin of some kind of spotted beast thrown over his shoulder, said, by way of Tarek, "Captain Sparrow, greetings. I am Psamtick, one of the pharaoh's scribes. How do you like our city?"

"Very beautiful, mate," Jack replied. "I've never seen anything quite like it."

"Do they have large cities where you come from, Captain Sparrow?"

"Yes, they do," Jack said, wondering what Psamtick would think of London, or Paris, or Singapore. The servitor came by again, and ladled a serving of beef—Jack was fairly sure it was beef—mixed with lentils, in a sauce, onto Jack's plate. He had to use his knife as a scoop to get it onto the bread. Picking up the rolled bread in his fingers, he took a bite. It was spicy, but not scorching. He noted that Zerzurans did not eat with their mouths open, and wondered what Cutler Beckett would make of this gathering.

"And what is your country called, Captain Sparrow?" Psamtick asked.

"It's called England," Jack said. "It's an island too," he added, as an afterthought.

Psamtick seemed surprised to hear this, but pleased. He smiled politely at Jack as he chewed, and Jack returned it.

By the time the meal ended and they all rose, Jack worried that perhaps the queen and her children would

simply disappear, and he wouldn't get to see Amenirdis at all. But she nodded significantly at Tarek, and the bodyguard escorted them to the royal family.

"Jack!" Amenirdis said. Her eyes, outlined with heavy kohl, looked enormous.

"Hello, Your Highness," Jack said. "How is the homecoming going?"

"Fine." She looked at him. "You look very nice, Jack. Beautiful jacket and waistcoat."

"Thank you. So do you, love. Every inch a princess."

Amenirdis looked down. When she raised her eyes, the remote expression was gone. The woman he'd known last night was back. "Jack, to be honest, it's been difficult."

"It's bound to be," Jack said. "Things change."

"That's the problem," she said. "Things here are exactly the same. I'm the one that has changed. I'm not used to… this…anymore." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand that encompassed her hair and clothing. "I wish I could run away. I mean, sail away…with you and the *Wicked Wench*."

She said it half-jokingly, but Jack looked into those heavily outlined eyes, and saw the woman he'd known looking back at him, and knew that, for this one moment at least, she was serious.

"I would love that," Jack said. "But you know as well as I do that isn't going to happen, love."

She nodded, biting her rouged lower lip. "I do know it."

Amenirdis sighed, then seemed to pull herself together. "I have to stay, and help my brother. Tomorrow, he will be crowned. That will take place in the temple, and no outsiders will be permitted. But then he will address the people from the balcony of the temple, and I hope you will come to see that. Tarek will bring you, if you would like to be there."

"All right," Jack agreed.

“It will be an historical event for my people. Do not reveal this to anyone, please, but during this address tomorrow, Shabako will tell the people of Kerma that, a year from tomorrow, all slaves on Kerma will be freed.”

Jack nodded. “Makes perfect sense to me, love. Good that he’s giving himself time to work out all the details.”

She smiled slightly. “Actually, I will be responsible for much of that work. My brother intends to name me grand vizier. That is our term for what your people would call a chief advisor, something of that sort.”

“Prime minister, we call them in England,” Jack said. “Congratulations. You will do a splendid job, I am sure of it.”

“Thank you. I will do my best, Jack. It is my chance to set things right. It was a shock to me today to encounter my own slaves again.”

Jack nodded. “I’ll wager it was, love.”

Amenirdis nodded. “Believe me, the irony was not lost on me. But Jack, I *will* do a good job. Before too long, they’ll be free, I keep reminding myself of that. I have many ideas for improving my homeland. For one thing, I believe we will try to send some of our best and brightest young people off the island, to go to school. I am not sure where people of our color can be educated, though. Perhaps we will need to hire tutors for them.”

“What do you want them to learn?”

Her eyes were as hard as bronze in the flickering light of the torches. “How to make black powder, Jack. We’ll also need to know how to make tempered steel, using iron and carbon. We have iron here on the island. We can mine more of it. And, once the iron is taken from the ground, we will need to know how to cast it into cannons. How to make pistols and muskets.” Her voice was resolute. “One day, perhaps, the Heart will be stolen, or be lost. If that day ever comes, we must be ready. We must be able to defend ourselves. There are too many Cutler Becketts in your world.”

Jack nodded. “I know you can do it, love.”

She nodded. “I will, Jack. So much depends on it.”

Jack looked away, and took a deep breath. His eyes fell on Shabako, resplendent in the torchlight, and he smiled wryly. “You’re the one should be pharaoh, love,” he said. “Your father was right to be proud of you.”

Tears stood in her eyes for a moment, then she glanced away, blinking them back. “I can accomplish more as grand vizier, Jack,” she said. “If I were pharaoh, I’d have to worry about getting married and providing an heir. This way, I can concentrate on being the power behind the throne.”

Amenirdis added, after a second, “And it’s not like my brother is lacking in intelligence. He is simply…young. He survived as a slave on a sugar plantation for years. Only someone strong and determined could do that.”

“Right you are, love.”

“Oh!” She looked up at him. “I must tell you—there is bad news. My brother does not know the sacred word to use in the labyrinth. He has given his blessing for the mission, though, and promised to pass me his bracelet tomorrow, after he is crowned.”

“What about old Piye’s successor? Does he know it?”

She shook her head. “More bad news. Nedjeh was driving up on the cliff road about six months ago, when the wheel came off his chariot. He was killed, and he had not named a successor, because they were still hoping that Piye would return.”

“You’ll have to try and figure out the word, then. Surely you have some idea as to what it might be?”

“Some,” she said. “It will be an ancient word, from the time when my people left Old Kerma behind. It’s bound to be an important word, one that has meaning. The name of a pharaoh, or a queen would be my first guess.”

“That makes sense. Why don’t you make a list of—”

Jack broke off as a voice spoke from behind him, urgent, peremptory. He turned to see Queen Tiyy standing there.

Her meaning was clear to Jack, even without a translation. Her Majesty wanted her daughter to stop wasting time with this common, no-account sea captain, and go talk to important people—their guests. Sweeping off his tricorne, Jack smiled and bowed. “Your Majesty,” he said.

The queen inclined her head graciously. “Please translate what I say, love,” Jack said, to Amenirdis.

“I will, Jack.”

“Your Majesty, I apologize for taking up your royal daughter’s attention. I know she has guests to attend to. I shall take my leave of you. Thank you for such a lovely evening.”

When Amenirdis had finished translating, Jack bowed again. The queen’s expression thawed a bit. She studied Jack’s face, then nodded, and spoke.

“My mother says thank you for your understanding.” The princess gave Jack a sidelong look, and added, “She also says you have the instincts to be a courtier, and a very charming smile.”

Jack glanced up. “Is that good, or bad?”

The princess smiled faintly. “A little of both,” she said.

Jack bowed to Amenirdis. “I wish…” He stopped himself. Saying anything would just make things worse. He nodded, and went to find his companions. It had been an eventful day.

The following afternoon, Jack stood among the crowd of Kermans who had gathered to hear their newly crowned pharaoh’s first address to his people. Chamba stood beside him, once more dressed in Kerman regalia.

Suddenly there was movement at the opening to the balcony. The crowd began to cheer as the new pharaoh emerged. He wore a vest that was open down the front, and a broad, jeweled collar. The skin of a lion was draped over one shoulder, and on his head was the crown bearing the

twin uraei, the double cobras. The cheers of the crowd grew in volume as he stood there, his mother on his left, his sister on his right. Finally, Shabako raised his hands for quiet.

Jack listened as the pharaoh spoke, and Chamba translated:

“People of Kerma. My fellow citizens, and my subjects. I come before you today, crowned as your new pharaoh. Today is a day for joy and rejoicing throughout our land. After nearly four years away from Kerma, living among strangers in foreign lands, I have returned to accept my father’s crown. My sister, the Princess Amenirdis, rescued me from those who would have kept me from my homeland, and the lion throne.”

He tugged his sister forward as the crowd cheered for her.

“This week there will be rejoicing, as I make my first royal progress throughout our land. I look forward to sharing that joy with all of my people. But today is also a day for sober reflection. There is a new world out there, and I have seen it, as has my sister. The outside world has changed greatly, which is not surprising, but many of these changes are disturbing, nay, frightening. In the coming months, I will be traveling among you, talking to my people, so all of Kerma will know what my sister and I observed. There are fearful winds blowing through the world, my people. Kerma must be strong and prepared. To that end, we will need all our citizens to work together. When I say ‘citizens’ I speak not only of landholders—free men and women. I speak of everyone on our island.

Everyone. I say it again…*everyone*.”

There were murmurs from the crowd, now, and puzzled expressions.

“My people, to make Kerma as strong as it must be, in order to keep our island safe and secure, I intend to strengthen the spirit of our homeland by making a radical alteration in our society. Hear me, O my people. My first

royal proclamation is this: One year from today, all slaves on this island shall be declared free. All of them."

The people of Kerma were listening intently, silently, now. Many faces bore grim expressions of disapproval.

"You may ask why I am doing this. Enduring what I have, I can do nothing else! My people, while I was gone from you, I was captured and sold into slavery. For years I labored without reward or benefit, enduring degradation, humiliation, and privation. I was starved, and I was beaten. I was *lashed*. Witness for yourselves."

The pharaoh threw off his cloak, then slipped off the vest, standing bare-chested. Shabako turned, so his back was to the crowd. Jack could see, even from his vantage point in the back, that Shabako's back didn't appear quite normal. He was reminded of that time he'd had to dress the wounds on Chamba's back.

A collective gasp arose from the crowd.

The pharaoh waited until all had had a chance to see, then he faced them once more, slipping his vest back on.

"My people, I wish to reassure you. I want the best for Kerma. I am not doing this because of some personal agenda. I am doing it because, after long consideration, I have decided that this change will be the best thing for our homeland. Change can be frightening, this I know. But it can also mean a rebirth. And that, my people, is what Kerma shall have! Rebirth! A new spirit of freedom! Rejoice with me today—begin work with me tomorrow. May Apedemak bless his people, and keep our Heart strong."

With that, he turned and left the balcony.

Some of the crowd cheered. Others began to shout indignantly.

Jack and Chamba slipped out of the crowd and headed back to the *Wicked Wench*.

"Inspiring speech," Jack said, as they headed down the hill.

“It was, Cap’n,” Chamba said. After a moment, he added, “Captain Sparrow, I been meaning to tell you something. Now be as good a time as any, I reckon.”

“All right,” Jack said.

“Cap’n, when you leave, I won’t be coming with you. Shabako, he told me what he be planning last week. I been thinking about it hard, and I know what I need to do. So yesterday, I asked him to let me stay here, on Kerma, and help him free the slaves. Shabako said I can stay.”

Jack sighed. He’d been rather expecting this. “I’ll be sorry to lose you, Chamba,” he said. “You’ve been a good and reliable hand. But I respect your decision, lad.”

“Thank you, Cap’n Sparrow. Don’t worry that I be forgettin’ you. I won’t.”

“I won’t, either.”

They walked on, together, toward the ship.

That night, long after sunset, Jack was sitting in his cabin, still fully dressed, trying to read. The ship’s bell had just rung four bells of the evening watch. He’d hoped that reading would help him pass the time, and make him sleepy. He’d borrowed a slender volume from Frank Connery. It contained a Shakespeare play Jack had never read before. But the more he read, the more he realized he’d picked the wrong play if he’d hoped to calm and distract himself from what awaited him on the morrow. *The Tempest* was full of magic and eldritch creatures—even monsters. It was a relief when someone tapped on his door.

“Who’s there?”

“Frank Connery, Captain Sparrow. You have a visitor.”

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Tarek stood framed in the opening. “Tarek!” Jack exclaimed. “What is it? Is there trouble?”

The giant bodyguard shook his head. “No, everything is fine.” He lowered his voice. “Captain, she sent me to bring you to her. If you want to see her tonight, come with me now.”

Jack wasted no time in joining him.

They walked quickly up the hill to the royal palace. While they were outside, in the shadow of a tree, the bodyguard handed Jack a dark, hooded cloak. “Here, Captain. Put this on, pull it down to hide your face. Don’t speak. Follow me.”

Jack did as he was bade. Tarek led him through small, narrow corridors, then up several ramps. Jack realized he must be taking them through the passageways used by the palace servants.

Finally, they reached the door to a room, and Tarek halted. “I will be back before dawn, Captain, to lead you back through the palace. Do not be late.”

Jack nodded. “Thanks, mate.”

“She is expecting you,” the giant said, and turned away. “Go in.”

Jack pushed the door open, and went in. He was in some kind of antechamber, he realized moments later. He crossed it, and stood outside the door to the next room. Taking a deep breath, he tapped gently.

The door opened. “Jack!” Amenirdis stood there, her face bare of paint, her own hair curling softly around her face in black coils that reflected the lamplight. She wore no jewelry, only the simple white silk nightgown she’d made, the same one she had worn the first night she had come to him.

Reaching out her hand, she took his and drew him inside the bedchamber. Then she closed and locked the door, shutting the world away.

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Chapter Sixteen
The Heart of Zerzura

True to his promise to Tarek, Jack was up and dressed the next morning while it was still dark outside. He didn't realize Amenirdis had awakened until she spoke to him, her voice soft, still a little blurred from sleep. "I want to come with you," she said.

"You can sleep a bit more, then just meet us at the temple, love."

"No, I want to walk down with you. Wait just a moment, Jack."

She rose from the bed, her slender body bare in the predawn dimness, and padded softly out of the bedchamber. When she reappeared again, minutes later, she wore what Jack realized must be the Kerman equivalent of a riding habit: wide trousers tucked into sturdy heeled boots, and a short tunic that left her arms bare. She slid on a sort of short, loose jacket, then bound her hair up in a scarf. The princess was already wearing her bracelet on her right wrist. She picked up her brother's and slid it onto her left one. "Ready."

A bowl of fruit stood on the table. Each of them took a couple of pieces, and munched them as they went.

Tarek was waiting, as promised. The bodyguard led them out of the palace, through the back ways. They slipped outside, then headed down to the docks.

As they walked, Jack kept his eyes on the ground, searching the side of the road for something he needed. Finally he spotted what he was looking for, and stopped to pick up a good-sized rock from the side of the road. Carrying

it, he continued toward the docks. When they reached the *Wicked Wench*, he put out a hand to Amenirdis, then spoke softly, urgently. “I have to go pick up Christophe, love,” he said. “No reason for you to come along while I row over to the brigantine. But while I’m gone, I want you to do something for me. It’s important, savvy?”

She nodded. “Very well, Jack.”

When Jack finished explaining what he wanted her to do, he hastened back aboard the *Wicked Wench*. Heading for his cabin, he grabbed his canvas sailor’s duffel and filled it with the items he’d prepared to take along with him yesterday, plus a coil of rope. Then he placed them into the boat with him, and ordered his crew to lower away.

Christophe was ready to go. He climbed down the brigantine’s ladder and stepped cautiously into Jack’s boat. Neither spoke as Jack rowed them back to where the *Wicked Wench* was docked.

In silence, the four of them walked back up the hill to the Temple of Apedemak. Once inside the massive complex, Amenirdis led them to the main chapel, then they followed her down corridors and sloping ramps, down, down, going ever deeper below the huge complex. Finally, they reached an ancient door made of carved stone.

Amenirdis nodded at Tarek, and the bodyguard took up his station around the bend of the passageway, to make sure no priests ventured down that corridor while the three searchers were inside the labyrinth. In case anyone questioned Tarek, the princess had given her bodyguard written orders, signed and sealed by order of Princess Amenirdis, Grand Vizier to His Majesty, Pharaoh Shabako.

The central portion of the huge stone door featured three carved lion heads, none of them exactly alike, arranged in a triangle in the middle of the door. The mouth of each lion was open slightly, just wide enough to admit one of the bracelets.

Amenirdis produced her bracelet and her brother's bracelet. "My brother knows we are going in," she told Jack. "But no one else except Tarek does."

"What about the sacred word?" Jack said. "Did you make a list of names to try?"

She nodded. "I have them written down. The names of the pharaohs that ruled Old Kerma, and as many of their queens as I could find."

As they were talking, Christophe stood there, silent, rubbing the bracelet he now wore on his wrist. "That does not sound good, Jacques," he said, speaking for the first time that day. "I thought you had all of this venture planned out."

"I did," Jack said. "But there's no way I could have predicted this. Captain Ward's book didn't mention you had to know some sacred password."

Christophe shrugged, but said nothing further.

Amenirdis held out her hand to the rogue pirate. "It is time. Give me my father's bracelet."

Christophe pulled it off his wrist and handed it to her. The princess studied the bracelets intently, then looked at the lions' heads. "The bracelets are not identical," she murmured. "Each bracelet must go into the correct opening." Taking one bracelet, she did a final comparison, then slid it into the lion's mouth. A click sounded. She drew a breath of relief. "One down," she said.

After another close examination, she matched up the second bracelet, then inserted it. Another click followed. Quickly, she inserted the third bracelet, and, with a final click, the door swung open.

"The bracelets will stay in the door, until we speak the sacred word while on the other side of the door when we leave," she said.

Jack, Amenirdis, and Christophe entered the labyrinth.

Jack had done his best to prepare himself. In the canvas duffel he carried over one shoulder there was a full canteen,

some smoked meat and dried fruit, several pieces of chalk, a large canvas bag to carry treasure, and two small leather bags that were identical, except that one was half-full of rocks of varying sizes. Over his other shoulder he carried the coil of rope.

As Amenirdis had promised, he could see perfectly well inside due to the light that shone from the translucent rock of the ceiling. Jack had never seen anything like it.

The doorway lay behind them. Featureless corridors led off to the left and right. Amenirdis stooped to trail her fingers along the stones of the floor. When she lifted them, they were gray with dust. “The priests could not get in, to clean,” she said. “The god will not like having his sacred place neglected.”

Jack slid his duffel off his shoulder and pulled out a piece of chalk. “Which way?”

She hesitated. “I am trying to remember, but I cannot. It has been too many years. Let us try left.”

Jack drew an arrow on the wall, pointing left. “Let’s go.”

They walked for a few minutes, then the corridor branched off. Again Amenirdis chose left. Jack chalked the wall, and they went on.

Almost immediately, the corridor began to slope steeply downhill. The princess stopped abruptly. “This is wrong,” she said. “I do not remember this. We must go back.”

Jack marked the wall, and they turned around and headed back up the slope.

When they reached the intersecting corridor, they paused. “Now what?”

Amenirdis bit her lip, looking frustrated. “Jack, the more I think of it, the more I believe we should have turned right after coming through the door.”

“Right it is,” Jack said. “We’ll go back, after I mark the wall.” He scribbled for a moment.

Christophe was wearing a pained expression, but remained silent.

When they reached the door, Jack marked their new path, and they went on.

The right-hand corridor ran straight for at least ten minutes, then jogged to the left, then right, then went straight again. Jack dutifully marked each turn, even though there were no alternative paths to take, and their footprints were visible in the thin coating of dust. They walked for another ten minutes or so. Jack had been counting steps since they'd left the door. When the corridors turned, he wrote the number of steps on the wall.

After the corridor again branched left, then right again after only ten paces or so, then again ran straight for a longish walk, Jack called a halt. "Amenirdis, you come with me," he said, "Christophe, stay where you are."

The rogue pirate glared at him. "Where are you going, Jacques?"

Jack looked offended. "Just a few yards down the corridor."

"Why?" Christophe demanded, suspiciously.

"If you *must* know, I need to pump the bilges," Jack replied, blandly.

Christophe rolled his eyes. "Why didn't you go before we left?"

Jack and Amenirdis walked back down the straight corridor for about thirty feet. "Turn around, love," Jack said, quietly. "Stand with your back to me."

Opening the waistband of his britches, Jack took out Tia Dalma's compass and flipped it open. It was as he'd half expected…the needle spun crazily. "Amenirdis," he said, "something strange is going on."

"What, Jack?" she asked.

"I'm looking at Tia Dalma's compass, and it's just spinning, aimlessly. And I assure you that I'm quite clear on what I want most: I want to get to the center of the labyrinth."

Stowing the compass away, he fastened his britches. “Also, do you realize that if we were walking outside, and had covered this much ground, we’d be in your harbor by now? The temple is on a hill. We’ve walked about a mile; I’ve been counting paces. And we’ve been going roughly northeast, on level ground. If you were to draw a line from the temple, a mile northeast, that would put you into the harbor.” Jack turned to face her. “Or, rather, roughly a hundred feet *above* the harbor.”

Amenirdis shrugged. “This is Apedemak’s temple. And his labyrinth. The gods have great powers, Jack.”

They walked back up the tunnel until they reached Christophe, who looked at Jack. “Better, Jacques?”

“Much.”

They walked along the straightaway. At the end, the corridor turned left, then branched three ways. Amenirdis stood there, looking carefully down each branch. Jack started to walk past her, into the middle branch. She threw up an arm to block his way. “No, Jack. Stop.”

“Why?”

“Because we have encountered our first illusion.”

Jack peered down the corridor. “Looks perfectly ordinary to me,” he said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She continued staring at it, frowning. “Something is not right. I cannot quite see….”

“*Sacre bleu!* ” Christophe cried. “Out of my way, Jack! *Mademoiselle*, you are as *fou* as he is! There is nothing there.”

Jack smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant expression. Stepping out of the way, he waved, ushering the rogue pirate past him, so he could continue down the blank stretch of corridor. “By all means, Christophe. After you.”

Christophe hesitated, then shrugged and leaned against the corridor. “How do I know you didn’t come in here last night and lay a trap for me? This is just the kind of trick you would play, Jacques.”

“One of me better tricks, coming in here last night, with no bracelet, and then carefully covering my trail with this nice dust, just to fool you, Christophe,” Jack commented, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Nobody has been in here for five years,” Amenirdis said, coldly. “Because you stole my father’s bracelet, thief.”

Christophe crossed his arms and looked away.

Jack nodded at the corridor. “What do you see, Amenirdis?”

“There is an opening in the floor,” she said. “It is too far to jump.”

“Damn,” Jack said. “Do you remember this from before?”

“No. Either the high priest brought us a different way, or part of his chant included the sacred word, and saying it negated this trap.”

Dropping to her hands and knees, the princess crawled forward, disturbing the dust. She sneezed, then moved a few inches more, and halted, peering down at what, to Jack, seemed to be a completely solid floor.

“The light only illuminates the first twenty or thirty feet,” she said. “Then it all becomes gray, then black. I believe the shaft narrows.”

“Is there a ladder we have to climb down?” Jack asked.

“No. Jack, do you have something I can drop down there? So I can listen for it to hit the bottom?”

“I do indeed,” Jack said. “I tried to think of everything.” Reaching into his duffel, he withdrew the half-full leather bag. Ceremoniously, he reached into it, and withdrew a chunk of gray stone. “One rock, suitable for dropping.”

Walking over to Christophe, he handed him the stone. “If you would be so kind as to hand it to the lady,” he said.

“Why don’t you give it to her yourself ?”

“Because I would never willingly turn my back on you. Especially when I was standing on the edge of a big, deep hole.”

Christophe drew himself up. “You impugn my honor?”

“I’d say shooting Don Rafael in the back pretty much established everything I need to know about your ‘honor.’ Or the lack of it.”

Jack could tell Christophe was thinking of drawing his elegant colichemarde and running him through, but after a moment the rogue took the stone and walked over to hand it to Amenirdis. “Your rock, mademoiselle.”

Taking the stone, Amenirdis held it a foot above the floor, then released it. Even though he’d known what to expect, Jack was still amazed to watch it drop through the seemingly solid stone floor—

—which then proceeded to vanish. The gap Amenirdis had seen from the beginning was revealed.

Christophe cursed again, and jumped back. Jack edged closer to peer over the drop-off.

“Long way down,” he said. “Did you hear the rock land?”

Solemnly, she shook her head, no.

“Bugger,” Jack muttered, looking at the gap. It was close to ten feet across. And, with the wall only about ten feet behind them, it would be impossible to get a running start to try the leap. “The rope won’t do us any good; there’s nothing to attach it to on either side.” He looked back down. “And it’s probably not long enough to reach the bottom.”

Amenirdis was staring fixedly to Jack’s left. “Move, Jack,” she said, and crawled sideways along the gulf. Dust rose up. They both sneezed.

Putting out a hand, she ran it down the wall, over the emptiness. When her hand reached the level of the drop-off, her fingers moved outward, at right angles, as though she were running them along a solid surface.

“This is a ledge,” she said. “Most interesting. A double illusion.”

Jack crawled over, and verified this for himself. He could clearly feel a solid projection running along what his eyes told him was emptiness. It was wider than his hand with his

fingers outstretched, but not by a whole lot. “You’re right. It’s not quite a foot wide. Should be enough,” he mused. “Though trusting my weight to something I can’t see…” He shrugged. “No way around it, eh?”

Jack stood up. “Christophe,” he said, indicating the gap, “will you do the honors?”

The rogue came over and dropped down to feel the ledge. “Very well,” he said.

“Jack, I don’t think I can do that,” Amenirdis said, staring at the pit. “What if I miss a step?”

“I’ve got an idea about that,” Jack said. “Don’t worry.”

Christophe took the precaution of removing his coat, hat, boots, and stockings. “If you would be so kind as to tie these onto your pack, Jacques?”

Jack nodded. The rogue pirate edged out onto the ledge, and moved along it, fairly rapidly, feeling his way with his feet. Amenirdis had to look away. Christophe reached the other side, and stepped onto the solid corridor.

“You’re next,” Jack said, taking the rope off his shoulder.

“But—”

“Just do what I tell you. Put your back to the wall, and don’t look down. Take your boots off.” She obeyed, then stood beside the ledge. She was trembling.

“It will be all right,” Jack said, soothingly. He tossed the free end of the rope to Christophe, who, without being told, backed up against the wall, preparing to hold the rope taut.

“See, we’re making you sort of a railing,” Jack said. “The rope will help keep you upright. Just edge along sideways, the way Christophe did. Don’t look down.”

She glared at him. “This might seem like child’s play for sailors who spend half their time walking around on yardarms and such, but it’s not easy for ordinary people!”

Jack smiled and winked. “You’re not ordinary.”

Her mouth tight, Amenirdis edged along the last of the corridor. Jack moved back until he and Christophe were holding the rope taut, about chest-high on her.

Closing her eyes, she began moving resolutely along the invisible ledge. Sweat trickled down her face as she felt her way along, eyes still closed. As she neared the visibly solid corridor, Christophe said, “Only about another foot to go, mademoiselle. You are almost here.”

Then, moments later, she was on the other side. Amenirdis let out a whoosh of breath, and plunked down in the middle of the corridor, as though her legs had given way.

Jack took off his coat, hat, and boots, then tied their clothing and the duffel together with the rope. Christophe took up most of the slack on it, then pulled the bundle across to the other side of the void, as Jack edged along the ledge, then sprang nimbly to safety.

The group redonned their clothing and footwear, and Jack passed around the canteen before they proceeded.

Amenirdis walked along the corridor, looking around her intently for any more pits. The path soon branched, and she went a few steps down each way before she returned. “We go to the left,” she announced.

“How can you tell?” Christophe asked. His tone toward her was considerably more respectful than it had been earlier.

“There is an illusion in the tunnel to the left. An opening in the wall that you cannot see.”

Jack and Christophe followed her, until she stopped before a section of wall. “Here is the opening. It might be best if you walked through with your eyes closed. It can be disconcerting, penetrating an illusion.”

“I’ll go first,” Christophe volunteered.

Closing his eyes, he stopped though the solid-appearing wall. The illusion held, this time. He disappeared, and the wall still appeared solid. Almost immediately, though, they heard an ominous clicking and scrabbling, then a loud, distinctive hiss. Christophe shouted, “*A moi, Jacques*!”

Jack ducked his head and leaped through the wall, Amenirdis at his heels. He had his hand on the hilt of his cutlass, and drew it as he landed.

A monster. Why is there ***always*** *a monster?* he wondered.

This one was a particularly fine specimen, as monsters went. It was larger than most—at least twenty feet from the tip of its hissing, forked tongue to the end of its barbed, poisonous stinger. The creature was black, some kind of hideous hybrid of cobra and scorpion. Its cobra head was easily as big around as Amenirdis's waist, not counting the hood that flared out on either side, and it was reared up, its head at least six feet off the floor. The rear half of its body was that of a scorpion, scuttling along on eight spindly legs, its movements terrifyingly quick. The barbed, deadly stinger at the end of its segmented tail was held up, four feet in the air, poised to strike.

Jack had landed in a large, rectangular chamber, not a corridor, and the cobra-scorpion was moving forward, as though it had come from the opposite wall. Christophe, sword drawn, was slowly retreating, waiting to attack until his expected reinforcements arrived.

Seeing the creature, Jack skidded to a halt. He glanced behind him at the featureless wall, and only then realized he couldn't be sure where he'd come through it. Amenirdis, too, faced their venomous opponent, a bronze dagger in one hand, and her papyrus list of names in the other. Clearly, a strategic retreat wasn't uppermost in her mind, though it certainly had been in Jack's. *Bugger*, Jack thought, disgustedly. *I'm the only sane coward in a room full of brave idiots.*

Slinging the duffel bag and the coil of rope into a corner, he stood poised to attack.

"Jacques," Christophe called. "Be careful. It spits."

"Wonderful," Jack yelled back. "Amenirdis? We'd rather not have to engage with this beastie if one of your names

will make it vanish, or melt, or something."

"Kashta! Shabako! Piye! Taharka! Amanislo! Apelta!" She shouted the names, one after another.

"It's still there," Jack said, unnecessarily, to the princess.

"Senkamanisken! Analmani! Piankhy! Kasta!"

"Jacques, is there a corner behind me?" Christophe yelled.

"Yes!" Jack shouted. "I'll go round to the beastie's left, and get it to turn toward me, and you go right. Got that?"

"Go!"

Jack raced to his left, and saw the barbed tail with its deadly stinger flash toward him. He heard liquid splat against a hard surface and Christophe's yelp. The cobra head must have spat venom. Even as he dodged flying poison, Jack half turned and slashed upward and to the right with his cutlass. He felt the edge of his blade bite into something hard, then the hardness gave way with a crack, and the cutlass penetrated the creature's tough exterior with a meaty *thunk*. For a terrifying second he thought his blade might be pulled out of his hand by the scorpion's tail, but it came free as he followed through, dripping a substance Jack didn't want to get within a foot of—yellow, viscous; he'd have staked his good rum that it was poison.

He heard Amenirdis shouting. "Shebitku! Tanwetamani! Khababash!"

He caught a glimpse of Christophe darting around to the creature's right side, where Jack had been moments before. Obviously feeling Jack's attack on its tail, the cobra head swung away from the rogue, aiming at Jack. Christophe took advantage of the distraction and lunged, piercing the lower part of the snake's neck. Jack gasped as the fangs spurted venom in a jet, and threw himself to the side. The poison splashed against the wall where he had been just an instant before. Jack was already moving fast, but he sped up, slashing at the head. His weapon clove through the flared

hood until the edge cut deeply into the snake's muscled neck, leaving a gaping maw of a wound.

The scorpion-snake writhed in agony. Christophe lunged again, and this time his sword went straight through the neck. He hung on grimly as the monster flailed, pulling him off his feet.

"Alara! Ergamenes! Arrakkam! Tanoutamoni! Psamtik! Natakamani! Nenu!"

The creature spat venom again. Christophe, still hanging onto his sword, nearly fell into a pool of it as his blade finally came free, and he dropped.

"That's all the pharaohs," Amenirdis yelled. "I'm starting on the queens! Much shorter list!"

Jack reversed direction and ran back, thinking he would have another go at the creature's tail, but to his surprise, the barbed stinger lay in his path. He leaped over it, realizing he must have cut it clean off earlier and not realized it.

"Amanirenas! Shanadakhete! Amanitore! Aqaluqa! Tuty! Mi! Amenirdis! Nasala! That's all I've got!"

Christophe thrust into the cobra's neck, over and over.

The monster was clearly weakening under the double assault.

Jack leaped in for another slash. It was handy, having an edged weapon in a fight like this. Christophe, expert swordsman that he was, had to depend solely on the point.

The cobra spat venom one more time, then its neck drooped. Amenirdis was closest to it. She ran in, her bronze dagger ready, and stabbed it hard into the huge, slit-pupiled snake eye.

The creature collapsed, and lay still. Amenirdis pulled out the dagger, and wiped the blade off on the creature's hood.

Jack and Christophe stood there, holding their befouled swords. The only sound was that of humans panting for air.

Jack got enough breath back to gasp, “Not pharaohs… not queens…what else…have you got?”

“Don’t know!” she gasped, clearly frustrated. “Records… in the temple aren’t…complete, perhaps. Some names may have been lost…or copied incorrectly. Many of the queens’ names…weren’t recorded. Kings in those days…had many wives.”

“Great,” Jack said. Picking up her useless papyrus, he used it to clean off his blade, then sheathed it. Then he handed the list to Christophe so he could do the same. “How many more of these beasties are we likely to encounter?”

Amenirdis stared down at the dead creature. “A combination of cobra and scorpion. Both creatures of Earth. That means we have Air, Fire, and Water still waiting for us.”

“*Zut*!” Christophe said. The rogue still hadn’t managed to catch his breath.

“*Think*, Amenirdis,” Jack said. “If it’s not pharaohs, or queens, what could it be? Some ordinary term? The word for sandals, or bread, or liver and onions? Something like that?”

Amenirdis and Christophe were both looking at him as though he’d sprouted pink and green feathers. “All right, forget the liver and onions,” Jack said, disgustedly. “You said it had to be a word that was *sacred* right? Okay, pharaohs are sacred, and queens, I grant you that. What else is sacred?”

“Well, the gods themselves,” Amenirdis said. “And goddesses, too, of course.”

“Which of them would be special to Apedemak?” Jack persisted. “This is his temple, after all.”

“Special?”

“Does he have a wife? A sister? Brother? Parents? A son or daughter?”

“No, none of those things, at least not as he was worshipped in Kush, or Nubia,” she said. She looked thoughtful. “But Apedemak *was* worshipped in Egypt, too, in the ancient times….” She began to walk back and forth,

avoiding puddles of venom, thinking aloud. “In Egypt he was worshipped under the name ‘Maahes.’”

“That’s worth a try.”

“And Maahes did have a mother,” Amenirdis said, still pacing. “In northern Egypt, he was the son of the cat goddess, Bast. And in southern Egypt, closer to Kush, the cat goddess who bore him was known as Sekhmet.”

“Three more names for you to try, then,” Jack said. He passed around the canteen again, then offered the others strips of smoked meat and dried fruit, while chewing on some meat himself.

“This room doesn’t have an exit,” he said, picking up the coil of rope, then shouldering the bag. “So where do we go now?”

Amenirdis pointed to the wall to the right of the one they’d come in. “We go there.”

“How do you know?” Jack said, then answered himself. “Because part of that wall isn’t there.”

She nodded. The men followed her through the wall.

They kept going, moving as quickly as they could, always alert for the next trap. Amenirdis led them through four more illusionary walls, before they stepped into another large chamber instead of a corridor. Jack looked around him. “Uh-oh.”

Before he could worry further, another creature pushed through a wall to the right of them. This one was not a monster, not exactly. It was difficult to see, but when Jack heard its shrill cry, he knew it was real, and dangerous. It was an enormous falcon, and it appeared to be made of pale, shimmering smoke.

The creature was as big as their first foe. Its shadowy beak and talons were huge, and somehow Jack knew they were real enough to wound, or kill. “Here were go again,” he muttered. “Amenirdis!”

“Maahes!”

The shadowy falcon opened its beak and screamed. Jack drew his cutlass.

“Bast!”

Christophe drew his sword.

“Sekhmet!”

Without further ado, the grayish falcon-shape turned and vanished into the wall at the same spot where they had entered the chamber.

Jack looked at Amenirdis. “Good job, love. That simplifies things considerably.”

She nodded. “That one was Air, Jack.” She led them through the illusion-wall.

Now that they had the word, they moved faster, occasionally breaking into a jog. The next time they found themselves in one of the larger rooms, Jack and Christophe merely leaned against the wall as an enormous salamander, the size of an elephant, lumbered toward them. It was black, spotted with orange, and the whole thing had a faint haze of flame flickering around it.

“Sekhmet!” they all yelled.

“That was fun,” Jack commented, watching the last of the creature’s flaming tail disappear through the wall. “So much for fire.”

The corridors seemed to be growing narrower. They curved a bit more.

Jack had gotten so blasé about the illusion-walls that he didn’t even bother to shut his eyes when he passed through the next one they encountered. And that was the only thing that saved him from being snatched up by the great jaws of the nightmare waiting on the other side. It was another hybrid, an insane cross between a crocodile and a hippopotamus, but twice as big as a normal hippo. The crocodile jaws yawned above him, rimmed with sharp teeth. Atop the grayish head waggled cute little round water-horse ears. The jaws snapped shut, just missing him.

“Sekhmet!” Jack screamed like a banshee, dropping and rolling away as a mighty foot the size and shape of a barrel of powder—but rimmed with vicious curved claws—slammed down.

The hippo-croc trundled forward, through the wall, and was gone.

“Jack, are you all right?” the princess asked, rushing to Jack’s side.

“I nearly got my bloody arse *eaten* by that water beastie,” he grumped, sitting on the floor in the dust. He sneezed thunderously.

After he picked himself up, and reclaimed his bag and rope, they went through the illusion-wall—only to find themselves in the center of the labyrinth.

It was just as Amenirdis had described it, except that the piles of treasure were now dusty. Dust even filmed the large, pale-green gem that lay atop the outstretched palm of the golden statue of Apedemak.

Jack, who had known what to expect, didn’t stop to look around. He bolted straight for the statue and grabbed the Heart of Zerzura. “Mine!” he caroled, blowing the dust off, then kissing it as he jigged across the floor. “All mine!”

“Jack?” Amenirdis ran toward him. “Jack, what are you *doing*?”

“Grabbing the best part of the treasure,” Jack said. “What else did you expect, lass?”

“No, Jack!” Amenirdis cried out in shock, her voice full of outrage and sorrow, “*No!* I told you! Zerzura *needs* the Heart! Please, Jack! Please!”

“Sorry, Amenirdis,” Jack said. “Someone should have warned you never to trust a pirate.”

“Jack,” she begged, “don’t do this. After everything we went through! Please!” Sobs choked her voice.

Jack shrugged. “Sorry. I made it clear from the beginning I was in this for meself.”

Pulling the duffel bag off his shoulder, he shoved the Heart down into it, then took out the largest of his sacks. “Now, for some more treasure,” he said, looking around at the chests full of coins, gold and silver plates and cups, inlaid weapons, plus coffers spilling over with gemstones and jewelry. Grabbing a handful of jewelry, he let it slide into the sack. He was careful to keep one foot on the canvas duffel every time he bent over to grab another handful to slide into the bag.

Amenirdis, having seen the futility of pleading, stood there, weeping quietly.

While the altercation between Jack and the princess had been going on, Christophe had quietly been stuffing his own bag, only stopping when it began to bulge. His depredations barely made a dent in any of the piles. “Jacques,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the rendition of “Spanish Ladies” that Jack sang while happily filling his bag, “how do we get out of this place? Do we have to find our way back through all those illusion-walls again?”

“Nope, mate,” Jack said, absently buffing a huge ruby on his coat, then holding it up to the light coming from the ceiling. “Amenirdis was kind enough to tell me earlier that the second door, the one opposite the door we just came through, is a shortcut, pretty much a straight route back. You go down a ramp, and it takes you to a passageway under the floor of the labyrinth, then it surfaces just one corridor away from the entrance. There’s a door built into the wall that only opens one way. You push it open and turn right, and then there’s the entrance, just a few feet on. Are you ready to go? I’m having trouble deciding whether to get more gemstones, or more gold coins.” He gazed at the treasure piles thoughtfully.

“I will be ready in a moment, Jacques,” Christophe said, “I just need one more item. If you would be so kind…hand me the Heart.”

Jack heard a choked cry, and turned around, to find the rogue pirate standing with his hand over Amenirdis's mouth. His pistol was pressed to her temple. Her eyes were wide with terror.

Jack's mouth fell open. "Wha—"

Christophe's smooth, educated tones grew harsher, more threatening. "I know you, Jacques. You've always been soft. You wouldn't even kick that old sot who puked on your boots into the cove. You might be willing to steal from your pretty blackamoor here, but you'd never want her dead. Am I right?"

Jack stood up. "She said pistols won't work in here, Christophe."

"Do you really want to risk it, Jacques? Give me the Heart, and I'll let her go."

"Christophe, you've got plenty of swag!" Jack argued.

"So have you, *mon ami*. Now are you going to bet the pretty blackamoor's life on whether I can't pull this trigger, and if it doesn't fire, grab this knife out of my sleeve and slit her throat from ear to ear before you can get all the way across this room? I wouldn't chance it, Jacques."

Christophe took his hand away from the princess's mouth just long enough for her to gasp, then whimper, "Please, Jack! Please!"

Jack stood there, poised to leap, but the look in Christophe's eyes was enough to make him shake his head and put both hands up. "All right, mate. All right. You can have the bloody thing. Let me get it."

He bent over to pick up his duffle, then reached in and felt around for a moment. "Where'd it—ah. There. Don't hurt her. I have it." Jack pulled his hand out of the bag. His fingers tightly gripped the pale-green stone, holding it high so the rogue could identify it. With his other hand, Jack grabbed the small, empty leather bag he'd brought with him. "Here it is, Christophe, see? I'm just going to put it in

here, and then I'll throw it to you. Wouldn't want to risk scratching it, right?"

Moving slowly, every gesture obvious, he slipped the gemstone into the bag and pulled the ties at the top to secure it inside. "Now I'm going to toss it over there, mate," Jack said. "See?"

With a gentle toss of his hand, he threw the bag so it landed almost on top of Christophe's boot. Then Jack straightened up, both hands raised. "Now, let her go, Christophe."

"Oh, I will, Jacques!" With a vicious shove, Christophe sent the woman reeling across the floor. Amenirdis tripped over a coffer, fell, and lay there, stunned. The rogue pirate reached down and grabbed the bag, peeked inside, then stuffed it into the top of his sack, one-handed.

"And now I take my leave of you, Jacques," Christophe said. Aiming the pistol at Jack, he pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked down, but the pistol did not fire. Snarling, Christophe thrust the pistol into his belt. Seeing Amenirdis dazedly trying to sit up, he started toward her, his hand out. "You know, it's been a long time since I've had a woman, little blackamoor, and you really *are* pretty," he said. "You're coming with me."

A loud, coughing roar split the air. Christophe stopped short, staring at the doorway they had just come through.

An enormous male lion paced through the portal, his yellow eyes fixed on Christophe as he padded forward. Swallowing audibly, the rogue pirate straightened, leaving the princess alone, then he drew his sword and began backing away. Jack stared wide-eyed at the beast as he shook his tawny mane and roared again, so loudly that the piles of treasure rattled.

The lion came to a halt between Christophe, who was still backing away, and Amenirdis, who was crouching on hands and knees, trembling.

“Amenirdis,” Jack said, in a voice that shook, “*please* tell me that’s an illusion.”

“No, Jack,” she said, her voice unnaturally calm. “He is real.”

Christophe reached his bag of treasure. Grabbing it one-handed, he heaved it up onto his back, then altered his course slightly, now backing toward the exit.

“Ssss…Sek…Sekhmm…” Jack stopped stammering, then glared at Amenirdis. “*Say* it, dammit!

Christophe reached the exit, stepped through, then finally turned his back and began to run. Jack heard his footsteps echo as he sprinted down the ramp. He was making good time.

“Very well, Jack,” Amenirdis replied, softly. “But it won’t make any difference.” Her voice was steady as she said, “Sekhmet.”

Jack waited for the lion to turn around and head back into the maze, but the king of beasts merely shook his mane again, and stood there.

“Listen, love,” Jack said, “I’m going to come around the perimeter toward you, this way,” he pointed. “When I reach you, be ready to jump behind me.”

“Jack, I don’t think that will be—”

“Just *do* it, love!” He began edging sideways, reaching down to draw his cutlass. As his fingers closed over the hilt, dizziness engulfed him. He staggered. Heavy blackness swelled like a wave through his mind. He fought to stay conscious, but it did no good. Jack’s last thought as the blackness filled his mind and vision was that he had failed, after all, to protect her….

Amenirdis watched as Jack crumpled where he stood. He hit the floor, then lay there, unmoving. She noted with relief that he hadn’t smacked his head on the floor, and that his

limbs weren't twisted unnaturally. *He almost looks like he's asleep*, she thought.

"He sleeps," said the lion.

Amenirdis turned back to see the lion sitting a few feet away, regarding her calmly. She hadn't yet managed to struggle all the way to her feet, so it wasn't too difficult to bring up one knee, spread her arms, then bow her head in the deepest obeisance, the one used by priests and priestesses when they knelt in the chapel of the temple. "My Lord Apedemak," she murmured, "I sensed it was you. Please accept my gratitude for saving my life."

"Why should I not save the life of my handmaiden, little princess?" the god asked. "This is my place, and here my will is what matters."

"Which is as it should be, Lord," Amenirdis said. After a moment, she added, "And thank you also for sparing Jack Sparrow's life. He did not know, as I did, who you were when you entered this holy place."

"Why should I not spare him?" The god sounded faintly amused. "I chose him, after all, to do my will. To protect my people. To protect the Heart of Zerzura."

"So Christophe indeed took the ordinary rock I cast an illusion spell on this morning?"

"Yes," said Apedemak. "For all the good it will do him. He will not live long enough to enjoy the real treasure he took with him."

She glanced over at Jack's duffel. "My Lord Apedemak," Amenirdis said, hesitantly, "should I go and take the real stone out of Jack's bag? Perhaps conceal it, and thus protect it? Jack sounded so…genuine…about wanting it for himself, when he held it in his hand."

"If you do that, my handmaiden," Apedemak said, "will you not wonder all your life whether he was a good man, or one who would have betrayed you?"

Amenirdis nodded. "I accept your wisdom, Lord," she said. "I will make an offering in the temple tonight to thank

you for your gracious generosity toward this man.”

“Good,” the lion-god said. “Go with my blessing, handmaiden….”

As Amenirdis stared at him, the huge lion vanished, to be replaced by the figure of a man with the head of a lion, shining with golden radiance. The sight was so beautiful, yet so terrible, that she hid her face, and when she finally dared to look again, the god was gone.

Jack stirred, then sat up, rubbing his eyes. Yawning and stretching, he tried to remember what had happened, and how it had come about that he’d been lying there, asleep, on the floor of the labyrinth. The only image that floated through his mind was that of a huge lion, which was silly, of course. He’d seen a lot of beasties today, but a lion wasn’t one of them.

“Jack, you’re awake.”

Turning, he found Amenirdis sitting cross-legged on the floor, not far from him. “Hallo, love. Somehow I fell asleep. Can you imagine?” Jack shook his head. “Must have been the big fight with the cobra-thing. Think it’s about time we got out of here, don’t you?”

She nodded. Jack climbed to his feet, then helped her up. He picked up his duffel, then the coil of rope, and, finally, picked up the sack containing his collection from the treasure piles. “Shall we?” Smiling, he held out his hand to Amenirdis.

The princess gave him a wan smile as she took his hand. Together, they started across the dust-scuffed floor, heading for the exit. She walked slowly, head down, shoulders slumped; he was nearly towing her along. “You seem really tired, love,” Jack began, “so maybe you should go back to the palace and take a nap before we—”

Breaking off, Jack snapped his fingers. “Oh, wait. I’m forgetting! Hang on a second, love.”

Setting down his sack of treasure, he untied his duffel, reached in, and withdrew the big, pale-green stone, then turned around and trotted back, crossing the center of the labyrinth. When he reached the statue of the lion-god, Jack carefully placed the Heart of Zerzura back on the golden outstretched palm. “There you go, your godliness,” he said, lightly. “Keep that illusion strong. Your people don’t need Cutler Beckett and his lot of greedy maggots crawling around the Shining City.”

Jack turned away, just in time to nearly be knocked down when Amenirdis threw herself at him. Instinctively, he grabbed her. “What—”

Flinging her arms around his neck, the princess hugged him so hard she nearly drove the breath from his lungs. “Jack, Jack…my love, my love…”

She rained kisses across his startled countenance, both cheeks, his nose, and, finally, his mouth. Her kiss turned so passionate that his head swam.

When she finally pulled back, he looked at her. “What brought that on, love? Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m just…glad.”

Jack shrugged amiably. “All right,” he said, and bent to pick up the heavy bag of treasure.

“I’ll carry it,” she said, taking it from him. “Let me. It will be an honor.”

“Whatever you say, love,” Jack said, giving her a genuine—if puzzled—smile.

Hand in hand, they walked through the exit, leaving the labyrinth behind.

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Chapter Seventeen
A Matter of Honor

By the time Jack, Amenirdis, and Tarek made their way out of the temple, Jack was surprised to see that the trip through the labyrinth had taken no more than five hours. A glance at the sun showed him it was about noon.

Both he and Amenirdis were gritty with dust, as well as hungry and thirsty. “It is difficult to tell whether I want a bath or food more,” the princess said, thoughtfully, as they started up the hill toward the palace. Tarek paced them at a discreet distance.

“I know what I want,” Jack said. “A cup of rum and food.”

“Most of that can be arranged,” the princess said. “But I have decided. Bath first.”

“Can I watch?” Jack asked, hopefully.

“Only if you want to ruin my reputation for all time,” she replied. “You can go with Tarek to the male servants’ barracks, and wash off the dust while I have my bath. Then he can bring you back to the private courtyard the family uses, in the palace, and I’ll have food brought there.”

“We can’t eat in your rooms?

“My mother would disown me,” the princess declared.

Jack shrugged. Nothing ventured, as the old saying went. “I’ll need to be back aboard the *Wench* by four bells of the afternoon watch,” he said. “I told Robby to have all the water casks and provisions loaded by then, so we can set sail. Your people will be ready by then, right?”

“Tarek and I will be ready,” she said. “I spoke to the captain of the royal yacht. He will be ready. Must my brother come? He is very busy today, as you may well imagine.”

“I don’t think so, providing things go as you’ve planned. Ordinarily I’d have weighed anchor by now, but I want to give Christophe plenty of time to sail away. How long will the illusion you cast on the rock last?”

“It will last for a little while once they are on the other side of the protective illusion,” she said. “Perhaps an hour, maybe a bit more.”

“Enough time for him to sail six or seven miles,” Jack said, nodding. “That should be far enough to prevent him seeing us when we come out.”

“What if he *is* close enough to see your ship?”

“I’m not that concerned about it, love. His crew has had a chance to watch the *Wicked Wench*. They know that she’s bigger and faster than *La Vipère*—they chased us across the whole bloody Atlantic, now, didn’t they?” Jack chuckled. “Come to think of it, they may actually have believed that the *Wench* is a pirate vessel, because of that time I ran up the Jolly Roger—in which case, they’d be convinced we have more guns than we actually have. The men aboard *La Vipère* have gotten a nice prize from this venture, because of that bag Christophe carried away with him. They’ll be content with that, and have no interest in taking on the *Wench*, even if Christophe flies into a rage and orders them to do it.”

“But don’t they have to follow orders, the way your men do?”

Jack shook his head. “Pirates are different from merchant vessels or the navy. A captain’s word is law during battle, but pirates pride themselves on being more or less equals. The captain, quartermaster, first mate and ship’s surgeon—if they’re lucky enough to have a surgeon—usually get a bigger share of the prize, because they have more responsibility. They need more experience, to fill those posts.

“But a pirate captain has to be careful about what he orders. If he consistently shows bad judgment, or acts off his

head, or he repeatedly angers his men, say by unfairly flogging them, the crew will meet and elect a new captain. Don't think it hasn't happened, love."

"But isn't that mutiny?"

"Not if the crew feels they have just cause. I've heard of captains that wound up being marooned." Jack shuddered. "That's an unpleasant way to die, love." He gave her a reassuring smile. "Christophe is an experienced captain, even if he is a sodding rogue. He'd have to be barking *mad* to order his crew to attack the *Wicked Wench*."

"Anyone who would kill people who had surrendered, just murder them in cold blood, *is* mad, Jack."

Jack nodded. "There is that."

After washing off the dust, Jack was escorted by Tarek to the small courtyard Amenirdis had mentioned. Servants brought them food and beer, and Jack and the eunuch shared a companionable chat while waiting for the princess to join them. She did, appearing much refreshed.

"I am sorry I am late," she said, sitting down cross-legged at the low table. "I wanted to give my brother his bracelet, and our father's bracelet. When I told him that we discovered the sacred word, he was much relieved. There are several candidates for the new high priest, and he hopes to appoint one very quickly."

Servants placed food and drink before her, and she started in on them.

Before long, the meal was finished, and they rose to leave. Amenirdis smiled at Jack, a bit shyly. "Before we go, Jack, I have something for you. A gift. Actually, two gifts."

Jack smiled. "A gift? Two gifts? Not used to receiving those, love. Thank you." But after a second, his smile faded, and he looked down. "I don't have anything for you, love. I should, shouldn't I?"

“Jack,” she said to him, smiling, “today you gave me the best gift anyone ever has. Believe me.”

“I did?” He looked startled. “Um…don’t recall anything of the sort,” he said.

“I swear by Apedemak, I am telling you the truth,” she said solemnly. “Now hold out your hand.”

Jack held his right hand out, a bit nervously. Amenirdis produced a ring. “Let’s see what finger this will fit,” she said, and tried it. The middle finger proved a perfect fit. “There you go.”

Jack looked down at it. It was reddish gold, with blue enameled insets, and a large, red bezel. “Coral,” she said. “For my man from the sea.”

“I *love* jewelry,” Jack said. “It’s beautiful.” He turned it back and forth in the sunlight, admiring it, then, suddenly, his eyes widened in alarm. “Ummmm, darlin’, this doesn’t mean we’re *married* now, or anything like that, does it?”

Tarek, who was standing behind the princess, huge arms crossed over his massive chest, rolled his eyes.

Amenirdis burst out laughing. “No, Jack! I suppose I ought to feel insulted by that remark, but today, nothing you might do or say could upset me.”

Flustered, Jack stammered, “Uh, it’s not like that, love! I mean, it is, but it’s not, if you get my meaning. I was just… I’m not…I’m just not *good* enough for you, love.”

Tarek nodded solemn agreement with Jack’s statement.

“Yes, you are,” she insisted. “You’re a good man, and don’t let anyone tell you you’re not.”

After a moment, he nodded hesitantly. “All right, love. If you say so. I’m not used to thinking of meself like that, to be perfectly candid with you.”

“Jack, listen, this is not an ordinary ring one wears for adornment,” Amenirdis said. “I placed a spell on it. If you should ever want to come back to Zerzura, sail to within a league of the bearings you recorded, then breathe on the ring, all the while thinking of me. Then, just wait. I will come

to you, through the illusion, and escort you through it, as I did before."

Jack looked at the ring in wonder. "This means if I sail the Triangle, I can swing by, love. Especially after I buy my own ship, and have to answer to no one."

She nodded. "I will look forward to those times, Jack."

Then the princess picked up the other article she'd brought, and shook it out. It was a lengthy piece of hand-woven fabric, white with narrow magenta stripes running through the weave. "I made this for you while we were on the voyage," she said, "on my little hand loom. I think it's probably too long, but you can double it, like this." Stepping close to him, she wrapped the fabric around his waist twice, then tied it so the extra hung in short loops. "If you tuck it up like this, it won't show under your waistcoat, Jack."

He looked down at the homespun, then rubbed it between his fingers. "Does this have magical properties too, love?"

She smiled at him. "I cannot guarantee that it will stop a weapon, Jack, but as I wove it, I chanted, and what I chanted were spells of protection. When you wear it, think of me. I will pray to Apedemak each day that my weaving will be strong enough to protect you from injury, or sickness, or harm."

"Thank you, love," he said, and kissed her, wishing Tarek would take the hint and make himself scarce. Regretfully, he recalled his time limitation.

When they drew apart, she cleared her throat. "It's time to go, Jack."

With Ayisha, Tarek, and Chamba on board, Jack sailed the *Wicked Wench* back through the fogbank. Once more he had a ship in his wake, but this time it was the royal yacht, *Heka*, a brightly painted vessel that had a crew of oarsmen, in addition to its single mast. On its bow was painted a large,

kohled eye, on its stern a lotus, and on the sail was the head of a lion.

Despite his brave words to Amenirdis earlier, Jack was relieved to see no sign of Christophe's brigantine when his ship emerged from the illusion.

Sailing through the illusion-fog to leave the island had been simple and painless compared to what they had experienced on the way in. This time there were no strange voices, no almost-seen images, no unsettling swirling of color. The air around the ship simply appeared foggy, though, as before, the "fog" carried no water to dampen things.

Jack kept the *Wicked Wench* under sail until the ship was nearly a league away from the fogbank. Then he ordered the crew to heave-to.

The *Heka* approached, until she was lying just a hundred feet away, and then the yacht lowered her sail.

Amenirdis faced Jack, her expression somber. "I fear it is time, Jack. Please assemble your men."

Jack held up a finger. "Before I do that, I have a request to make. I've been thinking about what you said this spell would do, love, and, if you can control how it affects the crew, there's an element needs to be added to it."

"What is that?"

"From here, I'll be sailing south to Calabar, much as I wish I didn't have to." Jack grimaced at the thought. "And as soon as I sail into the harbor there, I'm going to have to report to Cutler Beckett, and he's bound to question my crew to verify what I tell him. In order to protect them—not to mention me own precious hide—can you cast your spell so they also forget about Christophe's ship, and how it sailed with us across the Atlantic?"

She thought for a moment, then nodded. "I will require a quiet place to chant and concentrate, in order to add an additional spell-thread to my weaving, but that can be done. I'll use your cabin, if you permit."

Jack escorted her to the cabin, and then waited outside, on the weather deck. After a little while, the princess opened the door. “I have changed the parameter of the spell, to accomplish what you requested.”

“Thank you, love,” he said, relieved. “It will be difficult enough trying to give my report to Beckett, without having to think up an explanation for *La Vipère*.”

She nodded. “I do not envy you that, Jack. Beckett is a man obsessed.”

“He’s rich already,” Jack mused, as, together, they walked up to the bow again, and stood by the rail. “And a very powerful man in the EITC at such a young age. It’s hard to imagine why he wants more gold, more power. If Beckett *enjoyed* himself as a result of his wealth and power, I could understand it…but all he does is work. What’s the fun in being able to afford the very best of everything, if you never enjoy yourself ?”

She shrugged. “He might as well be royalty.” Then she glanced over at the waiting *Heka* and took a deep breath. “Jack, summon your crew. Make sure they are all seated on the deck.”

The captain ordered “All hands!” and made sure his crewmen were safely seated on the weather deck. He turned to the princess. “Ready.”

She nodded, then beckoned Chamba and Tarek to join them, and led the way up to the bow. “Stand *behind* me, please,” she ordered them.

Jack stepped behind her, hearing uneasy mutterings from his crew. He smiled at them reassuringly. *This is for your own good, mates….*

Ayisha took out her hand loom. It was already strung with colorful threads. She began to chant, her voice rising and falling, as she swiftly cross-threaded more thread over and under the threads she had strung. At times the chant sounded melodic, then her voice would change, and it would

sound deeper, more powerful. Jack glanced at the hand loom, and saw that a pattern was emerging.

He looked back up at his crew, and saw their heads and eyelids were drooping. Many were beginning to sway as they sat. Amenirdis continued her chant. Slowly, one by one, the *Wicked Wench*'s crew slumped over onto their sides, and slept.

Amenirdis's voice dropped off, ending on one final note, just as her fingers tugged the last thread of the pattern into place.

Jack, who had never watched her actually cast a spell before, blinked, impressed. "My word, love! That was worthy of Tia Dalma!" Looking at her face, he hastily put out a hand to catch her arm as she swayed a bit.

"It…tires…one, Jack," she said. "But I will be fine in a few minutes."

"So how long will they sleep?"

"At least an hour, Jack, perhaps a bit more. When they awaken, they will remember nothing that happened after we first spotted the illusion-fog in the distance. They will remember nothing of penetrating the illusion, nothing of Kerma or what they saw there. And they will not remember Christophe's ship." She walked over to the ladder leading down to the weather deck and sat down heavily, as though her legs were wobbly.

Tarek came over, and produced a flask. "My lady, drink this. You need a restorative."

"I could get her some rum," Jack offered. "The good stuff."

Tarek looked at him with mingled exasperation and amusement. "Rum at this time would knock her flat, Captain Sparrow. She needs this herbal drink, sweetened with honey. Believe me, I know how to take care of her."

Jack pressed both hands together and made a respectful bob to the eunuch. "I know you do, Tarek. No one could do better."

Amenirdis drank long and deep, then passed the flask back to her bodyguard. “That helped. Thank you, Tarek.” She rose to her feet. “It is time to depart.”

Tarek waved at the *Heka*, and a crewman waved back. A small boat headed for the *Wench*, rowed by two Kerman sailors.

Jack went down the steps from the bow and carefully rearranged several of his sleeping crewmen, so there was a clear path to the ship’s ladder. Chamba, Tarek, and Amenirdis followed him.

Chamba went first, so he could row over in one of the *Wicked Wench*’s longboats. After he’d climbed into the boat, Jack held out his hand. “Farewell, Chamba. You will certainly be missed aboard this ship. Oh, and by the way—I now declare you an able seaman.”

Chamba shook his hand. “Thank you, Captain. I sure will miss you, and Mister Robby, and everyone. Good men, all of them.” The sailor had to pause to clear his throat. “Here’s the letter you asked me to write, Captain.” He held out a folded piece of parchment to Jack.

“Thank you, Chamba. I wish you the best.”

Jack and Tarek lowered the longboat. Chamba picked up the oars, and began to row toward the *Heka*.

Then it was time for the two Zerzurans to depart. Tarek climbed down first, so he could assist Amenirdis. Jack nodded solemnly at the bodyguard, and Tarek nodded back.

The bodyguard then tossed up a line to Jack. It was attached to a good-sized sack. “The pharaoh sent this for you and your men, Captain.”

Jack pulled the sack up the side of the ship, hand over hand, then heaved it over the railing with a grunt of effort. “Heavy!” he said.

“The pharaoh wished to reward a job well done, as he promised he would,” Tarek reminded him.

Jack put the sack down, then turned to Amenirdis.

He gazed at her, finding there were no words he could say, not public ones, at any rate. She gazed back at him, and he knew she was experiencing the same problem.

He reached out both hands, and she put hers into them. Jack leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “Fare you well, love,” he whispered. “I’ll miss you.”

“And I you, Jack,” she whispered in return. “You will be in my prayers every day.”

Then she stepped back. Jack let her slender, dark fingers slide through his. One last touch…

The princess climbed over the side and started down the ladder. When she neared the boat, Tarek reached up and lifted her down, depositing her on the seat.

She looked up, but did not wave, as the sailors rowed away.

For a moment Jack considered going to his cabin and getting his spyglass so he could watch them go, but one glance at his cluttered deck convinced him that by the time he picked his way over there, and then back, the *Heka* would be on her way.

So he simply stood there, both hands on the rail, watching as the little boat sped across the water. It didn’t take long for it to reach the yacht. One by one, the passengers transferred from the boat to the yacht, and then the sailors, too, climbed aboard. *Heka* raised sail, and the oarsmen plied their oars. Towing both boats behind it, the royal yacht headed toward the fogbank.

Jack could see one figure waving. Chamba. He waved back.

Heka glided toward the fogbank, and then she was gone.

Jack sighed. *That’s that, then…*

He wanted nothing more than to pick his way across the deck to his cabin and have a drink, but there were things he had to do. The stage had to be set for the crew’s awakening.

Hoisting up the bag sent by the pharaoh, he headed back to the bow, which was the only place with enough room to put the sack, unless he did more rearranging of sleeping bodies.

Putting down the sack, Jack spread the contents out with his hands. Even running his fingers over that that much gold and silver didn't cheer him.

Jack shrugged. *Any man would be a bit spooked*, he told himself, *out here all by his lonesome, with bodies sprawled all over his deck. Looks like the last act of* Hamlet*. A quick nip of rum, and I'll be right as rain.*

The thought didn't make him feel much better. Taking the folded parchment Chamba had brought, Jack laid it atop the coins that clearly showed in the open mouth of the sack, then weighed it down so a stray breeze wouldn't send it flying away.

With the stage set, Jack headed off to his cabin, tiptoeing over and past bodies. It brought back memories of that night that Esmeralda had turned up to rescue the *Wench*. Not for the first time, he found himself wondering what Esmeralda and Amenirdis had talked about when she'd had the princess over to *Venganza* to dine with her. Obviously, they'd talked about *him*. What had they said? They'd sure giggled a lot…

Reaching the door of his cabin, Jack entered with a sigh of relief. *Rum*, he thought. *I really, really need a drink. Or two…*

He also needed to hide the swag he'd brought out of the labyrinth. By now Jack had quite a number of hiding places in his cabin. Several of the deck boards could be pried up to reveal hidey-holes. And, of course, there was the largest space, located in the captain's head.

Jack spent some time arranging his pick of the treasure items in his assorted hiding places. Not all of them fit, so he decided to take the sack back out with him, and place it beside the pharaoh's. They could break up some of the

silver and gold plates, for instance, in order to divide them up.

Only then did he allow himself to sink onto his bunk, with the bottle of rum in hand...

A while later, Jack decided it was time to get back out on deck. Amenirdis hadn't been too sure how long the spell would last. It had been close to an hour since *Heka* had sailed away.

Carrying the sack, with half a dozen good-sized pieces from the labyrinth, Jack picked his way back across the deck, finding it considerably more difficult to avoid stepping on crewmembers than it had been earlier. He actually did lose his balance at one point, and wound up stepping on the cook's arm, all the while windmilling his arms desperately to avoid falling on his backside. He nearly spilled the sack.

But finally, he made it all the way to the bow and placed his sack next to Pharaoh Shabako's.

"There you go," he said. Sometime in the past half hour he'd begun talking to himself—the quiet was getting on his nerves. "Now, to find a bit of shade..."

In the end, Jack wound up dragging a few crewmembers, including Frank Connery, half a foot this way or that, so he'd have room to lie down. He plopped down onto the deck in the nice little patch of shade cast by the capstan, sitting down rather harder than he'd originally intended, because he lost his balance on the way down. Carefully, Jack stretched himself out on his side—

—only to find himself looking at a pair of large, calloused, and remarkably filthy male feet, approximately six inches from his nose. That wouldn't do, not at all.

Sitting up with a muffled grunt, he maneuvered himself around, then stretched out the other way so he was looking at nothing worse than the wood of the capstan. That was all right.

Jack closed his eyes. *Must make this look good*, he thought. *Don't want anyone suspecting I wasn't really*

asleep.

He wondered what Amenirdis was doing right now. Was she thinking of him? He remembered the way her skin felt, and her scent, and the way she…

"*Captain*! Captain Sparrow!"

Someone was shaking him frantically and bellowing in his ear. "Hmm…wuzzat? Hmmmm?" Jack said, opening one eye. It was his lee helmsman, William Banks, who was shaking him. "Wake *up*, Captain Sparrow!"

Jack opened the other eye. "Take your hands off me, Mr. Banks," he snapped. "That's an order."

Banks hastily let go, and sat back on his heels. "Captain Sparrow, thank the Lord! I thought everyone was *dead*!"

Jack sat up. "By Jove!" he said, putting just the right amount of surprise and dismay into his voice. "What the devil happened, Banks?"

"I don't *know*, Cap'n!" Banks almost wailed. "I woke up and it looked like this!"

Other bodies were beginning to stir.

The next quarter of an hour was a repetition of that same scene, more or less, as the remainder of the crew woke up. Finally they were all standing on the weather deck, expostulating. Several sailors scurried off to search for Chamba and the passengers, then reported them missing.

Jack leaned against the mainmast and let them discover things for themselves, for the most part. Inevitably, someone discovered the missing longboat, the sacks of loot, and the letter. Since it was marked "Captain Sparrow" on the outside, they brought it to Jack to open and read.

He did so, first skimming it silently, then reading it aloud to the assembled men:

> Dear Captain Sparrow,
>
> This is not an easy letter to write. I will miss you, and my shipmates aboard the Wicked Wench, but I am sure I am doing the right thing. I have decided to

accept Miss Ayisha’s invitation to go live with their tribe. They are good people, and she says I will be welcome and find a home there.

You see, I was once a slave, Captain. I ran away. The slavers burned my village, and took everyone. So I have nothing to go back to. Even for a sailor, it is hard to have no place you can call home. Sometimes I lie awake at night after dreaming they have caught me and are taking me back to be a slave again. It tires a man out to live afraid that he’ll lose his freedom.

By the time you read this, we will be gone. As I write this, you and all my shipmates are lying here, asleep. It was Miss Ayisha who did it. When she is this close to her home, she has powerful magic. Not long after you all fell asleep, a boat from an island where some of her people dwell came sailing through the fog, and hove-to beside us. People from the boat came aboard with this gold and silver. Miss Ayisha said it is to reward you and the crew for bringing them home.

Please read this letter to the crew, so my shipmates will know I said good-bye. I will miss them. Most of them can’t read or write, but they are good men all the same. I am real glad that Lucius and Etienne are friends now. We were all getting tired of hearing them go on at each other.

Wishing you calm seas and following winds,

Chamba

P.S. Miss Ayisha just told me to tell you not to try and follow us into the fog, Captain. Doing that would be very dangerous.

Jack finished reading the letter, then looked up. His crewmen were staring at him, shaking their heads and muttering. Featherstone and de Ver were bristling a bit at their shipmates.

“Listen up, mates,” Jack said, “I’m going to assign three men to divide up this reward, to ensure that each man gets his fair share. Judging by the size of this sack, I would advise all of you to put your share somewhere safe, so you can have it available to you when you’re too old to sail, or you get injured. Or perhaps you’ll want to make sure it’s

available to your families if something should happen to you one of these days. We all know a seaman's life is not an easy one. Not too many of us live to a ripe old age and die in our beds, lads."

He looked around the assembled faces. "First Mate Greene, Second Mate Connery, and…Samuel Newton. Can you please handle the task of dividing up this reward?"

"Aye, Captain!" they all replied.

"Good. Now, lads…" Jack took a deep breath. "Far be it from me to advise any of my crew to be less than honest with our employer. After all, the EITC pays us generous wages, does it not?"

The expected amount of grumbling negatives greeted this comment.

"So I'm just going to mention here, that, technically, it's my duty to tell the EITC, in the person of Mr. Beckett, about this, er, windfall, here." Jack gestured at the sacks lying at his feet. "However, Captain Jack Sparrow is not one to insist on niggling, unimportant technicalities of maritime regulations and contracts, when the welfare of his crew is at stake. So I intend to say nothing of this, lads." He indicated the pile of gold. "What each man here chooses to do is up to him, and the dictates of his conscience."

There was a relieved murmur.

"Oh, and Mr. Greene, Mr. Connery, and Mr. Newton?"

"Aye, Captain?"

"The money should be divided equally among you, except that I'll take a half-share, please. The other half of my share should be divided four ways, one-quarter to George Perkins," he said, naming the topman whose broken leg had been amputated by Doctor Martinez, "and one-quarter each to the families of Micah Wilson, Sam Hopkins, and Nathan Bolton. I feel that is only fair," Jack concluded.

His crew spontaneously broke into cheers. "Huzzah for Captain Sparrow!" Samuel Newton cheered as loudly as any of them.

George Perkins, leaning on his crutch, had tears running down his cheeks. Jack smiled graciously, waving aside the topman's efforts to thank him.

Jack raised a hand for quiet. "Now, lads, there's just one more thing. Mr. Beckett assigned me to find the bearings for this island Chamba mentions. Apparently some of Prince Shabako's and Miss Ayisha's people live on this island. Mr Beckett read about the island in a book, and told me to bring back the bearings. I think the island lies over there, inside that fogbank." He pointed, and the crew looked over at the smudge on the western horizon. "So, mates, let's get some canvas on the old girl. We're following where Chamba and our passengers went!"

Jack heard murmurs from the crew, whispers that included the word "danger," but there were no actual protests.

"Mr. Greene, Mr. Connery, lock these sacks up in the arms locker for now. Mr. Trafford, I'll want you on our helm. Let's make sail and get the bearings for this island for Mr. Beckett!" His crew scattered.

"Jack," Robby said, half an hour later, as they stood together on the bow, and the *Wicked Wench* plunged toward the looming fogbank, "I don't like the looks of this at all." He glanced around to make sure no one was within earshot. "You told me that Kerma had powerful spells guarding it. This looks…uncanny."

"It does," Jack said. "Nevertheless, Robby, Mr. Beckett gave us our orders. I'm to personally verify that the island exists, so I can give him the bearings."

Once more, Jack was on the quarterdeck as the *Wench* plunged into the illusion-fog. The captain had no intention of going all the way through it, of course. He just wanted his crew to experience a bit of what it was like to go in there so they'd know it was unpleasant, and then he'd order them to reverse their course.

The fog surrounded them, engulfing them in the blink of an eye, just as it had before. Jack staggered, and so did Lee Trafford. He looked down at the binnacle to see their course, only to find the compass needle spinning like a top. That hadn't happened before!

Screams erupted as sailors cowered, hands over their heads, batting at things that no one but they could see.

Jack gasped for air, feeling as though it had all been sucked from his lungs. This was ten times—nay, a hundred times—worse than it had been when they'd gone in with Amenirdis standing beside the steering wheel.

If we go any farther in, Jack realized, *we'll never get out!* On the heels of this thought followed a grim determination to save his ship. *I have to get us out!*

"Mr. Trafford!" Jack grabbed the helmsman and shook him until the man's eyes focused. "Come about! Reverse course! That's an order!"

Trafford locked his teeth in his lower lip and then managed to nod. "Coming about, Cap'n!"

Jack nodded and, ignoring the sights and sounds that were assaulting his senses, he staggered down the ladder and screamed, "Hands wear ship! Now! Let's get out of here! *Hands wear ship!* "

One or two men lifted their heads and began staggering toward him. Jack grabbed for lines and began working alongside them. *Maybe it will get better once we turn back*, he thought, remembering that sailing out of the illusion-fog had presented no real problem.

"Come on, mates! Hands wear ship! Lively! Lively, now! Move, you verminous cowherds! *Move*!"

Jack saw Frank and Robby come staggering over to help with the sails.

Slowly, the *Wicked Wench* turned and came about. The wind began to push against her sails. Jack realized that if they'd waited too long, the ship might well have wound up sailing in circles, unable to find her way back out.

But there, before him, he saw a patch of blue.

“Yes!” he shouted, as the bow of his ship nosed back out into safety and sanity. “Thank you!” Jack yelled, to any god that might be listening.

Jack kept after his hands until they’d sailed at least a league away, maybe a bit more. He couldn’t tell, exactly, because no one was turning the hourglass or marking the traverse board. Too many men were still huddled on the deck, sweating, pale, and trembling.

When the grayish fog was nothing more than a thick line on the horizon, Jack ordered the *Wench* hove-to. “We’ll get a fresh start in the morning, lads,” he said. “Let’s get the ship set to rights. Then we’ll all have a bite to eat and our ration of rum, eh?”

As the sun lowered toward the west, Jack’s crew slowly pulled themselves together. Hands began cleaning the decks where experienced sailors who hadn’t been seasick in decades had spewed. Others began checking the lines, and setting the quarterdeck to rights.

Jack, Robby, and Frank made sure that the hands most affected would be able to skip their night watch. When the ship was hove-to, not many men were required to be on duty.

Finally, shortly after sunset, all was quiet. The hands who had any appetite had eaten their evening meal. Jack was surprised to find himself hungry, so he and Robby sat down to eat in his cabin.

Robby still looked pale and shaken, but he appeared to have pulled himself together. “By the way,” he said, “I heard what you yelled at us. ‘Verminous cowherds!’ That was uncalled for, Jack! I used to herd my dad’s cattle.”

“I didn’t mean it personally, Robby,” Jack said. Then he realized, from Robby’s expression, that his first mate was doing his best to make a feeble joke. He grinned at him. “Sorry, mate.”

As the last faint paleness was leaving the western horizon, Jack took one more tour around the ship, checking that everything was shipshape. The moon, two days from full, shone down on the weather deck, turning the freshly scrubbed surface silver. Then he headed for his cabin. He puttered around for a few minutes, hanging up his hat, coat, and waistcoat, then he sat down on the edge of his bunk to pull off his shoes and stockings.

He thought about pouring himself a drink, but, just in case anything were to happen in the night, some aftereffect of what the crew had been through, he decided he'd better keep his head clear.

His stern windows were wide open, letting in a pleasant breeze—

—and a sound. A soft, muted sound. A faint, regular *sploop*, then *swoosh*. The noise was muted, but he recognized it. It was the sound of someone rowing with muffled oars.

Jack frowned, telling himself that he must be imagining it.

How could anyone be out here, in the Atlantic, hundreds of miles off the African coast, in a *rowboat*?

Was he having some kind of delayed reaction to the illusion-fog?

Jack scowled. He'd never be able to sleep until he'd verified for himself that there was nothing out there but water. Standing up, he automatically grabbed for his baldric and cutlass, slinging it on over his loose-sleeved shirt, even as he opened the door to his cabin and strode out onto the weather deck.

He stood there, listening, listening…and heard nothing. *That bloody magical fog has gotten you spooked, hasn't it, Jacky boy? Now you're jumping at shadows.*

Jack heard a faint thump against the side of the *Wicked Wench*'s hull.

*You're wrong, Teague. I'm right, and you're wrong. Not for the first bloody time, either. There **is** something out there…and it's trying to climb aboard my ship.*

He began moving forward, toward the portside amidships ladder, silent on bare feet. As he moved, he drew his cutlass, careful to ease it out soundlessly. He was only halfway there when a fancy hat came into view, then shoulders and a torso. Then someone slung a long leg over the rail and stepped onto the deck.

Jack caught his breath. *Damn! Why didn't I bring my pistol, too?*

He'd only made a tiny sound, but the intruder had a fighting man's instincts, and his own sword, a colichemarde with a gold and silver hilt and a Toledo steel blade, was in his hand in a movement too fast to follow.

"Get off my ship, Christophe," Jack said, his voice quiet and deadly, with none of the lightness he usually had in his tone. "If you climb down right now, I won't yell for help and have you shot. It's the best offer you'll get tonight. I'd take it if I were you."

The moonlight was so bright Jack had no trouble seeing the rogue pirate's expression. He flashed his old charming grin. "Jacques! I am so glad to see you, *mon ami*!"

"No, you're not. Not if you still have anything resembling a brain in your wine-sodden head," Jack said. "We had an agreement, Christophe. Remember? You aren't welcome aboard the *Wicked Wench*. Not you, and not your crew."

Jack flicked a glance to the north, presumably where Christophe had come from, but there was no trace of *La Vipère*. "Where is your ship?" he demanded.

"*La Vipère?* And my crew?" Christophe shrugged elaborately. "Jacques, they were ridiculous. It was all a misunderstanding!"

"What was?" Jack casually stepped a foot to his left, so he was directly between the rogue pirate and the expanse

of the weather deck. He did it by leading with his right foot, and when he stopped, his right foot was in front and his left foot was behind him, toes turned out, ninety degrees.

His body was straight, his weight balanced. He didn't bend his knees yet, or raise his sword fully, but when he did, he'd be in the *en garde* stance.

Christophe wagged his left forefinger at Jack. Jack could see his eyes—the moon was very bright—and they looked wild, with a strange glitter. "Jacques, it was really *your* fault, so you owe me, *comprenez*? If you hadn't switched the stones on me, none of this would have happened!"

"What happened?" Jack demanded. "Make sense, Christophe! Where is your ship?"

Christophe shrugged. "Gone, she is gone. My beautiful *La Vipère*. When I took out that—that *rock*—you gave me, I fear I…well, I confess I had a temper fit; I was provoked, you cannot deny it! First I ordered them to sail back through the fog so we could sack the island. They refused, those cowardly vermin! Then I told them that when you came through the fog, we would attack your wretched vessel, so I could take the gem of power that is rightfully mine. And they refused to do that, too! My first mate, he told me, no! That cowardly *boche*!"

"And?" prompted Jack.

"So I shot him." Christophe turned his hands palm up, shaking his head. "*Zut*! What a fuss they all made! It's not as though he was even a particularly good officer, Jacques."

He murdered his first mate in cold blood, right in front of his crew? Now things were falling into place. "I see," Jack said. "So they deposed you as captain, eh? There was no island close enough to maroon you on, so they put you in a little boat, and they set you adrift. Did they give you food or water? Five years ago you didn't give me any, remember?"

"No, Jacques, they didn't give me any food or water," Christophe sounded sullen. "As for what happened five years ago, that was a mistake on my part. I admit it! I was

sorry for it, too. I regretted it, but you had made me angry, *mon ami*. All these years, I thought you were dead, and I was very sorry. I was overjoyed to discover you were alive, Jacques!"

"I'm sure you were," Jack said, sarcastically.

"I was! Truly!"

"It doesn't matter, now. Christophe, listen carefully. You climb back down that ladder, and I *might* consider tossing down a canteen and some biscuit," Jack said. "But only if you immediately do as I say. If you refuse…"

"What, Jacques?"

"I'll kill you."

Christophe laughed. As he did, he swept his elegantly plumed hat from his head, and in a trice he had shrugged out of his embroidered satin coat. He wasn't wearing a waistcoat. Jack remembered the muffled oars, and figured that was where the waistcoat had gone.

Clad now only in his fine shirt, with the cascades of Belgian lace at the throat and wrists, Christophe assumed fighting stance, too, though he didn't raise his blade all the way, either. "Jacques, just welcome me aboard your ship, *mon ami*, and all will be well. Drop me off at the first civilized port you come to, and then you can live. We fenced many times, *mon ami*. Remember who always won?"

Jack raised his sword and bent his knees, so he was crouching a bit, ready to spring. "You did," he said. "But it will be different this time."

Christophe raised his colichemarde. "Jacques, you cannot win. I will be forced to kill you, then take command of this very nice ship of yours. What did you call her? The *Wicked Wench*, *non*? Good name for a pirate ship."

Jack began to circle, cautiously, studying Christophe. Watching him in action in the labyrinth had reminded him of just how fast his erstwhile friend was. He'd been trained by top French fencing masters. He was also four or five inches

taller than Jack, and his weapon was longer, giving far superior reach—a tremendous advantage.

But he's almost forty, and he's let himself go, a bit, hasn't he? Jack thought, coldly, analytically. *I've been practicing nearly every day for the past two months. Has he? From the way he was panting after we fought that cobra thing, doesn't seem like it. That fancy shirt of his is straining at the buttons. He probably weighs two stone more than he did five years ago—and a lot of it is sitting right there around his waist. I'll bet he's been overindulging for years, on all that fancy French food and lots of French wine…*

As he neared the portside railing, Jack saw Robby standing by the mainmast, a pistol in his hand. Other crewmen stood behind the first mate—nearly a dozen of them, all armed. Jack realized he didn't have to fight—all he had to do was give the word, and Robby would shoot Christophe. Or order someone to crack him over the head with a belaying pin.

Normally, Jack avoided danger whenever possible. If he'd picked up his pistol on his the way out of his cabin, this fight would already be over. But, by chance, he'd grabbed his cutlass instead. Or *was* it merely random chance? For some reason this encounter felt inevitable…and it also felt like something that needed to be resolved with cold steel.

This is why I've been practicing, Jack realized, suddenly. Ever since the *Wicked Wench* had sailed west, across the Atlantic, he'd been driven to fence, to practice swordplay with anyone that would give him a match, but he hadn't known why until just now. The moment he'd resolved to find Christophe and get the pharaoh's bracelet back, something inside him had known that this fight would happen.

Jack made his decision. For good or ill, this would end now, tonight. After tonight, Christophe would never bother him again—one way or another.

Tia Dalma would call it destiny…

“Mr. Greene!” Jack shouted. “Don’t interfere unless he kills or disables me. Savvy?”

“Yes, Captain,” Robby said, grimly.

Neither opponent saluted the other. This was not a match. This was a duel—to the death.

Jack attacked. He moved forward, stamping his bare foot on the deck, a movement called an *appel* designed to startle an opponent, cause his guard to falter. It didn’t work. Christophe thrust at him, and Jack parried. Christophe pressed his attack, thrusting, parrying Jack’s thrusts, all with lightning speed. It was all Jack could do to parry the rogue’s attacks. Jack retreated, parrying, defending himself. For the moment it was all he could manage, to track Christophe’s blade in the moonlight, and defend, defend…

Jack was being pushed back, back, across the deck. The blades rang against each other, a song of metal. Jack could see and smell sparks as they struck, steel sliding against steel.

Jack knew every inch of the *Wench*’s deck. He could have found his way around it blindfolded. He let Christophe back him down the narrow strip of deck between the main hatch grating and the amidships ladder, thankful he didn’t take a misstep. Christophe managed to catch him, once, high on his left arm, when he was just a bit too late in his parry. Though it was barely more than a nick, it stung.

“You’re…bleeding now…Jacques,” Christophe gasped.

Jack knew when he’d passed the opening to the amidships ladder without looking. He’d soon be up against the starboard railing if he continued to retreat.

*“Strategy! A swordsman must **think** as well as react! If you cannot strategize, you are no better than a wild beast, defending itself with claws or teeth! Are you a beast, Sparrow? A bird, perhaps? **No!** You are a **man**! **Strategize**!”* The words rang in Jack’s mind. They were the words of his first fencing coach, a master Jack had paid with his share of a prize *Troubadour* had captured off Portugal.

Very well. What was his strategy? Long term, it was to wear Christophe down, tire him enough to slow him. Jack wasn't even breathing hard…yet. As for strategy at this very moment…

Jack quickly jumped sideways, to his right, turning as he did, so his back was no longer to the starboard rail. Now he had room to maneuver, to retreat toward the ladder leading up to the quarterdeck.

Aha! As he'd hoped, Christophe had cut the corner as he advanced. The rogue pirate caught the edge of his left foot on the raised timbers bordering the ladder opening. He faltered for just a moment. Jack aimed a cut, and caught him, just above his left elbow. Christophe's attempt to parry, then riposte, came too late—Jack had already jumped back, out of range. "That one's for Amenirdis," Jack told the Frenchman.

"Jacques…*mon ami* …you are…such a child." Christophe paid no attention to his own wound. "Lust for revenge…like all…emotion…has no place…in good fencing." For the first time in the engagement, he lunged, his extension as fluid and flawless as a drawing in a fencing manual.

Jack retreated, moving back to basic *en garde* again, but he made sure that as he did it, that he also moved slightly to his left. *Strategy…*

Christophe executed a perfect forward recovery from his lunge, designed to gain him more ground without being obvious about it.

Out of the corner of his left eye, Jack saw a dark shape. One of his six-pounders, the one he'd leaned against the night following the battle with Borya. And behind him and to his right, was the capstan, with its protruding spokes. He'd have to be careful not to brush one of them.

Christophe lunged again, the blade of the colichemarde flowing like quicksilver in the moonlight. Jack parried it, even as he retreated, making sure that he again stepped slightly to his left.

Jack feinted, then when Christophe fell for it and parried, *he* lunged for the first time in the fight. He deliberately went wide to the left, and Christophe's attempted parry missed. If Jack's form in the *intagliata* had been better, he'd have had enough extension to run Christophe through the belly, but he only managed to nick him above his belt with the tip of his cutlass. Still, Jack forgave himself when he then managed to be fast enough to negate his opponent's riposte by striking the pommel of the cutlass against the colichemarde's blade, deflecting it—even as he leaped back, out of harm's way.

"That one's for…Marie," Jack yelled, seeing blood spreading across the middle of the rogue's shirt, black in the moonlight. His own breath was coming fast now, but he wasn't gasping like a blown horse, and he realized with satisfaction that Christophe was.

"Who…is…Marie?" Christophe gasped, with, Jack realized, genuine puzzlement.

The rogue drove himself, thrusting repeatedly, those lightning, deadly moves. Jack was forced back, back, having to retreat so quickly he barely avoided the spokes of the capstan at the last moment. He zigged left, then continued retreating, still angling left, aiming for the ladder leading to the quarterdeck. If Christophe was out of breath now, imagine how winded he'd be after having to fight his way up the ladder.

Christophe pressed his attack, thrusting, lunging, parrying Jack's thrusts and usually following each parry with a riposte. Jack was now breathing hard himself, but he could hear Christophe almost sobbing for air.

The next time Christophe lunged, and Jack retreated, as before, back and slightly to his left, Jack had the satisfaction of seeing that his opponent was now lunging with the anticipation that Jack would go left. The angle of his blade had changed, to compensate. *Good*, Jack thought. *Strategy…*

Jack thrust, and Christophe parried, then the rogue jumped back, panting loudly. He waved his left hand, and blood droplets spattered. “Stop…a moment, Jacques…just need a moment…to rest…catch my breath…”

“Hah!” Jack exclaimed. “Think I’ll fall for that old trick? I didn’t climb my first ratline yesterday, Christophe!” Jack knew damned well what would have happened if he’d heeded the French pirate’s plea. The moment Jack relaxed, he’d have been skewered.

Jack tried another lunge, hoping that Christophe’s avowed weariness and winded state would slow him, only to have the rogue pirate parry, then riposte with such skill that the point of the colichemarde barely touched Jack’s skin, just above his collarbone. If Jack hadn’t had excellent reflexes, it would have gone through his throat. As he leaped back, his heart hammering with the narrowness of his escape, he felt a small, hot trickle sliding down his chest.

I have to finish this soon, or I’ll make a serious mistake, and then I’m dead.

Jack retreated yet again. He had almost, he knew, reached the starboard ladder leading up to the quarterdeck. “You know, Christophe,” he said, “if you surrender now…I guarantee…you’ll not be harmed. I’ll give you…provisions… for your boat…”

“No…” Christophe said, following him, and thrusting, thrusting, always on the attack, even though his breathing was painful to hear.

“If you kill me…” Jack stepped back and up, the first step on the ladder. “…you won’t live…a bloody…minute. Robby will shoot you…or order…you shot. Think, Christophe!”

“Robby Greene…doesn’t…have…the…stones…to… shoot…me, Jacques…” Christophe wheezed, advancing and raising the line of his attack, so as to compensate for Jack’s elevated position. “I’ll…command…your…*Wench*…”

I wouldn't count on that, Christophe, Jack thought, grimly. He was bloody well certain that Robby would immediately shoot Christophe if Jack went down. His first mate hated the rogue captain possibly even more than Jack did. And Robby, notwithstanding his religious beliefs, was a pragmatist. He'd have no compunction about shooting the Frenchman in the back to save his crew, none at all.

Jack leaped up and back, taking two steps at once, and as he did so, he slashed down at his opponent, using gravity and elevation to help him. Ordinarily he wouldn't have risked a slash at an opponent of Christophe's caliber—it was such a blatant move, basically a cut done large and sweeping. Fine for use in battling monsters, but it left a duelist too open to a lunge or even a thrust. But Christophe couldn't lunge on the ladder. The most he could do was thrust.

Jack's downward slash took off a chunk of flesh and muscle on the bulge of the Captain's upper arm. Christophe screamed in agony.

For a moment Jack thought that was the end of the fight—that the Frenchman would fall backward, down the ladder, and wind up sprawled on the deck, able to be dispatched with a last, quick thrust.

But Christophe gathered himself and came on. He even managed an upward thrust at Jack.

"That one was…for Don…Rafael," Jack gasped. He stepped back onto his quarterdeck. He knew he couldn't last much longer. He was gasping, too, and his cutlass felt much heavier than usual. Sweat trickled into his eyes, stinging them.

Jack swiped at his forehead, blotting sweat as he retreated quickly, trying to give himself enough distance to be able to catch his breath. Christophe came after him, though he staggered a little when he reached the top step, catching his toe on it, nearly pitching forward. His left arm now swung limp, as though he had no strength in it.

Jack silently cursed his own weariness. If he'd been quicker, he could have taken advantage of that stumble.

Jack retreated past the steering wheel and the binnacle on his left, and the fife rail and little storage cabinet on his right, moving as fast as he could. He didn't want to engage in such close quarters, and he damned well didn't want to risk having his wheel or his binnacle damaged if someone's sword missed.

In moments, Jack would be at the portside ladder, and then he'd have to back down, defending himself. Not a good position to be in, even facing a wounded opponent. He felt the descending railing of the ladder beneath his fingers, and began backing down, just as Christophe, having caught his breath somewhat, crossed the quarterdeck in a rush.

For a moment Jack considered turning his back and racing down the steps two at a time, but he didn't think he could do it fast enough. And if he tried it, it was possible that Christophe might risk all and dart his sword at him—throw it, to hit him in the back as he ran.

Instead he raised his line to defend, concentrating on following the movement of the sword blade so he could parry. The yellow glow from the ship's lanterns hanging up on the quarterdeck, and the reddish glow from the two hanging on either side of Jack's cabin, warred with the silver moonlight, making focusing on the blade more difficult. Jack continued to parry, knowing that was all he could do at the moment. He needed a level field to execute his plan—assuming he could accomplish it successfully.

He'd been counting steps—ten, including the top step—so he knew when he was down. Jack retreated, but not too far, because he wanted Christophe to come after him. One more of those beautifully executed lunges…just one more…

Christophe came down the last step of the ladder. To Jack's disappointment, he seemed steadier on his feet, and his breathing was better. Still, he looked exhausted. He'd lost a lot of blood, and, judging by the look on his face, he

was in considerable pain. Jack, on the other hand, felt exhilarated, full of energy, as though he'd had a quick shot of rum and found treasure. He knew the feeling wouldn't last. But for the moment, he felt just fine.

Jack raised his blade slightly, focusing on his target. *Come on, come on…*

Christophe hung back a little, seeming loath to engage. "Jacques…give up. If you sail…back to the Caribbean…Borya will find you…and he'll kill you…."

"I took care of Borya weeks ago," Jack said, dismissively.

For the first time, he saw fear on his opponent's face. "You lie," Christophe said.

Jack shook his head, beckoning left-handed. "No. It's true. Come on, Christophe."

Christophe kept his guard up, but did not advance. Jack decided to start a conversation—in other words, get the blades ringing against each other again. Attacking, he thrust, had his thrust parried, then, when Christophe thrust, Jack parried and riposted. He was careful not to seem too energetic, or to let the crazy grin he felt inside show on his face. *Come on, Christophe, it's been a long, hard fight, and your opponent is tired, maybe you can run him right through this time, if you just lunge. Come on, lunge. Lunge, damn you, you devil!*

Christophe lunged, his line of action turned slightly to his own right, as he anticipated Jack retreating, back and slightly to Jack's left—as Jack had been doing since the beginning of the duel. Only this time, Jack *didn't* retreat. Instead he stepped forward, grabbing the gold and silver hilt of the colichemarde hard with his left hand, clamping his grip on it and forcing it even farther to the left. At the same moment he thrust hard with his cutlass. The point slid in slightly to the left of Christophe's midsection, just below the sternum, and Jack angled the thrust up by pushing his wrist down on the hilt.

Christophe’s eyes widened; his mouth dropped open. He gasped, but it was his last breath. Jack retreated one last time, pulling his cutlass free of the body, twisting it as he did so, increasing the odds that it would sever the big vein as it withdrew from the heart.

Christophe-Julien de Rapièr collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been cut. He was dead before he hit the deck.

Jack stepped back, light-headed with relief, and carefully laid his sword down on the deck beside him. “And that one, Christophe,” he said, knowing his enemy couldn’t hear him, but needing to say it anyway, “was for Esmeralda.”

Bending over, Jack braced his hands on his aching thighs, and just exulted in breathing and being the man standing. Standing, and *alive*.

He sensed movement on all sides and raised his head, realizing he was surrounded by his men. They were cheering, babbling congratulations, and a few even slapped him on the back. Robby, pistol still in his hand, was in the forefront, grinning at him. “Jack, I knew you could do it! I prayed for you to beat him, and you did!”

Jack nodded. Bending over, he picked up his sword, then wiped it clean on a patch of fabric just above the knee of Christophe’s elegant britches. He sheathed his faithful cutlass, mentally thanking it. It wasn’t fancy, it might be a bit battered and worn, but it was a good and true blade.

“Captain, what…what should we do…with it…him?” asked Roger Prescott, pointing down at the corpse. “I could fetch th’ Good Book…”

Jack looked at Robby, who had stuck the pistol in his belt. It gave him quite the piratical air. Robby looked back at Jack. Then, without a word, they both bent down and grabbed the corpse, Jack by the wrists, and Robby at the feet, and hoisted it up. Carrying it between them, they headed over to the port side rail, gave it one hard swing,

and sent it sailing out into the moon-silvered water. A loud splash followed.

"Featherstone, de Ver, you two clean up that mess on me nice, clean deck," Jack said, indicating the dark pool. "You, Mulligan, go round the weather deck and up to the quarterdeck, mopping up any other spilled blood you find. Someone cut that dinghy loose. Throw the hat and the coat in the slop chest. Maybe someone can use 'em."

Hands scurried to obey, leaving him and Robby alone.

Jack bent and picked up the colichemarde. The blade was discolored faintly, just at the very tip.

"What are you going to do with it?" Robby asked. "Will you keep it? Fight with it?"

Jack examined the gold and silver tracings on the hilt. The moonlight glinted off them, turning them all to silver. "No. Next time I see Esmeralda, I'm going to give it to her, so she'll know her granddad was avenged. She can hang it on the wall of her cabin, as a trophy."

"It's a beautiful sword."

"It is. But this is a bloody gentleman's weapon Robby, me lad. Not suitable for the likes of you and me, just humble—" He *almost* said pirates, but changed it at the last moment. "Er…mariners. I'm sticking with me cutlass."

Robby's mouth quirked at the pun. Jack laughed. "Come on, Robby, I'm going to sit down in my cabin, and have a quick swig of rum, then you're going to stitch up this arm."

"I'd be honored to, Jack," Robby said.

Carrying the elegant sword, the captain opened the door to his cabin and went in. After hanging up his baldric, and putting away the colichemarde, Jack was finally free to sit down in his chair. He couldn't repress a groan. He'd definitely abused himself during this long, long day—and he'd gotten little sleep the night before.

"Here you go, Jack," Robby said, passing him a generous dollop of rum in a cup. Jack swigged it down, then pulled off his blood-streaked shirt. His first mate busied himself with

the needle and thread Jack kept for mending—either clothing or skin.

“Don’t move.” Robby carefully eased the needle into the skin on his shoulder, and began to stitch. Jack hissed, but stayed still. “I swear I’ve never seen you fence better, Jack, but I’m still surprised you won.”

“I am, too,” Jack admitted. “Though Christophe wasn’t rational tonight, Robby. You heard him. That might have—ow!—affected his skill. He used to be a very canny fighter. But not tonight.”

“You were lucky.”

Jack nodded, not offended. “I was, mate—ow!” He grimaced.

“Sorry. That’s the last one, though.” Without asking permission, Robby sloshed a bit of rum over the five stitches, then, for good measure, over the nick between Jack’s collarbones.

“Mmmhhh! Dammit, Robby! You and Esmeralda, wasting good rum! That’s a sin!”

Robby ignored him as he peered at the tiny cut. “Lord in Heaven, Jack, you were *so* lucky! If that had gone an inch or two deeper, you’d have been lying there dead, right beside Christophe.”

Jack grinned. “But you’d have given *me* a nice service, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course. I’d have written the eulogy myself,” Robby said, gazing at the little wound, still shaking his head in wonder. His gaze moved lower. “What’s that you’re wearing?” he asked, as Jack got up and reached into his sea chest for Esmeralda’s red bandanna.

“Here, tie this around me upper arm, so I don’t rub those stitches out,” Jack said. He looked down at his midsection, and saw the striped sash Amenirdis had woven. “A present, from Amen—er, Ayisha, Robby. She told me it would—”

He broke off, staring down at the sash, as Robby tied the bandanna around his arm. “Wait a moment. Do you suppose…?” Jack muttered.

“Suppose what?” Robby asked, putting the needle and thread away.

Jack ran his thumb along the edge of the sash. “Uh… nothing…” he mumbled. *Probably just coincidence*, he thought.

Still, it wouldn’t hurt to always wear it, Jack decided. He hoped he wouldn’t need protection when he reported to Cutler Beckett in a few weeks, but he’d take all the help he could get….

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Chapter Eighteen
Exodus

Cutler Beckett sat at his ebony desk in his private office, regarding Jack Sparrow as though he'd crawled out from beneath a log in a swamp. His voice was flat, his eyes cold. "Stop right there, Captain Sparrow."

"But, Mr. Beckett—"

Beckett raised a forefinger. "I said, *stop*. Not another word, Sparrow. Let me see if I have the essence of this so-called 'report' of yours straight." He began ticking off items on his fingers as he spoke.

"Item one, you were unable to verify the exact location of Kerma. The bearings you have provided are actually the location of a large bank of fog? Is that correct?" Beckett didn't pause for a response, but forged ahead. "Item two, you had, in your possession, at least two inhabitants of Kerma, but both of them are now gone, because someone cast a magical spell on you and your crew, and you fell asleep on the deck of your ship, only to awaken with your passengers gone and a longboat missing. You currently have *no* idea as to their whereabouts. Correct?"

Jack Sparrow didn't meet his eyes, only shifted his weight uneasily, turning his tricorne in his fingers, "Uh, Mr. Beckett, I—"

"I wasn't finished, Captain," Beckett snapped.

"Sorry, sir," Sparrow said quietly, and fell silent.

"Item three, you took on a cargo of muscovado sugar and molasses in Antigua, and, instead of delivering said cargo to its assigned destination in *Liverpool*, you have brought approximately *half* that cargo back here to *Calabar*.

Your explanation for losing half your cargo is that it was damaged during an attack by pirates in the Bahamas, correct?"

By now Sparrow had learned his lesson. He didn't try to speak, merely nodded.

"And, finally," Beckett continued, "item four, during that attack my *own* vessel, the *Wicked Wench* nearly sank, necessitating numerous *expensive* repairs to said ship in Savannah. Repairs that you signed for, that will be charged to the EITC."

Beckett eyed Sparrow with all the warmth of a glacier. "Is that a correct summary of the salient points of your decidedly rambling account, Captain Sparrow?"

Sparrow stood there, turning his hat, silent.

"*Answer me, Sparrow*!" For the first time, Beckett raised his voice.

Sparrow jumped. His hat slipped out of his hands and fell. "Oh, yes, sir. Yes, you pretty much summarized it, yes, Mr. Beckett. Sir." He bent over and retrieved the hat, then stood there looking down at it, as though he wished he could clap it on his head and make a hasty departure.

"And in addition to what I have already spoken of, I also noted, among other things, that you gave an account of your sailing to New Avalon and picking up yet *another* allegedly Kerman slave, one that the sewing woman claimed was her brother, is that correct? And that slave is also gone. Correct?"

Sparrow nodded. "Yes, Mr. Beckett."

"How did you 'pick up' that slave, Sparrow? Did you purchase him? With your own money?"

Sparrow shook his head. "No, Mr. Beckett. I didn't have enough."

"So you *stole* him, is that what you're saying? Meaning you are, in point of fact, responsible for *two* thefts of valuable property? The slave from Dalton's farm, and now this slave from New Avalon?"

Sparrow cleared his throat. “I didn’t exactly say that I *stole* him, Mr. Beckett. The sewing woman, Ayisha, she told me if I wanted her to take me to the island, I’d have to let her bring her friend on board, in Calabar. I didn’t ask any questions about how he came to be with her, sir. Then, after we left Calabar, Ayisha demanded that I take her to the New World so she could get her brother. She knew where he’d been taken. I don’t know how she knew.”

“And?”

“When we located the brother, he was on a sugar plantation. So um, she, that is, Ayisha, she left the ship for an afternoon. She must have seen her brother and convinced him to run away. All I did was provide her with a boat, and a couple of sailors to row it, sir.”

“You thought I would approve of this…this…secondhand theft?”

“I didn’t know whether you would or not, Mr. Beckett. But it was clear to me that the woman wouldn’t talk unless she had her brother with her.”

“So after getting the brother, why did you then set off to follow the Triangle?” Beckett was getting a headache, from trying to keep the whole story straight in his mind—not to mention the fury simmering beneath his controlled exterior.

Sparrow took a deep breath. “At first I thought it might be better to take our cargo on to Liverpool, Mr. Beckett. But then, after the pirate attack, when much of it had been destroyed, I figured the best thing I could do was to head for Kerma. She promised to lead me there.” He shrugged. “So after the *Wicked Wench* was repaired, in Savannah, I headed back east. The wind worked out better that way, coming down from the north, sir.”

“Tell me more about this pirate attack. Why didn’t you simply surrender and turn over your cargo? Why did you resist, and thus cause *my ship* to be badly damaged?”

Sparrow shuffled slightly, not looking up. “Mr. Beckett, the pirate that attacked us was flying a red flag, sir.”

Beckett frowned. The more Sparrow talked, the more confusing this all became. “A red flag. And what, pray tell is the significance of that? Naval vessels do that to signify ‘no quarter’ don’t they?”

“Yes, Mr. Beckett. But there were—are—some pirates over on the Spanish Main that flew—fly—a red flag with a horned demon’s skull. We, that is, the merchant ships, sir, we call them rogues, sir. These ships have a nasty habit of taking a prize, then slaughtering everyone aboard. They do this so they can take the vessel itself, in addition to the cargo. Or sometimes, they don’t bother with the ship—they just burn it, with all aboard. When they began firing on us, I knew one thing for sure. Merchant ships that surrender to these rogues never make another voyage, Mr. Beckett.”

“So, believing you and everyone aboard would be killed, you elected to put up a fight.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What happened to this ‘rogue pirate’?”

“His powder magazine blew, sir. One of our shots must have hit it.”

“I see.” Beckett considered what he’d been told. “And then, if the *Wicked Wench* was as badly damaged as you say, how did you manage to get all the way to Savannah for repairs?”

Sparrow looked up at him. “We were rescued by another ship, sir.”

“You neglected to mention that earlier. Which ship? An EITC ship?” Beckett took a sip of tea from a delicate porcelain cup.

“No, sir.” Sparrow bit his lip. “Sir, the ship that came to our rescue was the same one I encountered when I was first mate aboard the *Fair Wind*, last year. Ship called *Venganza*.”

Fortunately, Beckett had swallowed the mouthful of tea. His nostrils flared as he fumed, tapping his fingers on the desk for nearly a minute before he was sure he could speak in a controlled fashion. “I…see. And you expect me to

believe that your friend, this attractive 'Lady Pirate,' just *happened* upon your sinking vessel in time to rescue it? Captain Sparrow, the more I hear of this story of yours, the more it sounds like something you dreamed up in a tavern, over a bottle! Are you drunk?"

"No, sir!" Sparrow said, indignantly.

Cutler Beckett shook his head and slapped his hand down on his desk, narrowly missing his teacup. He managed to catch the cup before it fell. "Tell me the truth! Is that how you actually lost the sugar? Or did you give this pirate the muscovado, and then lie about what happened when you reached Savannah?"

"No, Mr. Beckett! The EITC did an inventory and they removed the bad barrels, sir! They noted what they'd done on my bill of lading! I have that for you, along with my logbook."

"So you would have me believe that this Lady Pirate saved my ship from sinking, helped make temporary repairs, then escorted you to Savannah? Without taking any cargo? Just out of the goodness of her heart?"

"Well, sir, she did seem to have a good heart, now that you mention it," Sparrow said, nodding at him. "Especially considering her line of work."

"Oh, come now, Sparrow! You expect me to *believe* a pirate rescued you and your ship for nothing?" He narrowed his eyes at Sparrow. "She helped you just because she remembered you from last year, and she *liked* you? The lady must have liked you rather a lot, eh, Sparrow, to make such an effort on her part worthwhile. What exactly did you *do* to earn such regard, eh?"

Beckett watched as Sparrow's cheeks darkened, visible despite the weathering. *He's* ***blushing****. But…that must mean that he and this woman actually…*

Cutler Beckett's tight control on his temper suddenly snapped, like frayed, rotted rope. He surged up out of his chair, hands curling into fists. "Damn it, Sparrow!" he

shouted. “Lady Pirates and ghost-haunted fogbanks and the whole ship falling asleep—it’s like something out of a bloody fairy tale! Why didn’t you sleep for a hundred years, while you were at it?”

Beckett’s eyes narrowed as he locked gazes with the merchant captain. “Captain Sparrow, do you believe that I am gullible? Or *stupid*, even?”

Sparrow shook his head, his dark eyes widening. “Oh, no, Mr. Beckett. No, sir. No.”

Beckett studied the man who stood before him. Sparrow’s dark eyes were steady and frank, his stance one of respect, with a healthy touch of real fear mixed in. He appeared both humble and anxious, which was just as it should be. And yet…

“Jack,” Beckett said, with an edge in his voice that could have sliced paper, “you’re lying to me. I don’t know precisely what you’re lying about, but I assure you, I *will* find out. And when I do…” He shook his head, gravely, and looked back down at the papers on his desk. “You might want to think about that, Captain.”

Sparrow clearly was at a loss regarding how to reply to this last, so he remained still and silent. Beckett made an irritable shooing-away motion. “You are dismissed, Captain Sparrow.”

Sparrow placed both hands together and gave that abbreviated Oriental bow Beckett had seen him use before, murmured, “Yes, Mr. Beckett,” and left.

Cutler Beckett sat there at his desk for a moment, breathing deeply, feeling the blood pounding in his temples. He was furious, frustrated, and bitterly disappointed at seeing his dreams of Zerzuran riches crumbling before his eyes.

And that wasn’t the worst part of it. The EITC director shook his head with a sigh. He hated to admit it, and was extremely annoyed with himself for having such a human

failing, but there was no denying the truth. He, Cutler Beckett, felt personally *betrayed*.

He'd dispatched Jack Sparrow on this mission with such hopes, and he'd really trusted that he'd chosen the right man for the job. In the past two months since Sparrow had left, just after he blew out his candle and fell asleep at night, Cutler Beckett had pictured himself in a rosy future. Having risen to the very top echelons of the EITC, perhaps he could aspire to the Privy Council. He'd be fabulously wealthy, a Peer of the Realm, respected, feared…and all the while, Jack would be there, at his side, serving as his smart, capable, trustworthy and oh-so-charming aide, his personal assistant.

And now this.

Cutler Beckett rubbed his temples beneath his wig, and sighed.

After a moment to indulge his disappointment, he straightened, made sure his wig was properly aligned, and then raised his voice. "You may come in, now, Mr. Mercer."

The door that led into Ayisha's former sewing room opened, and Ian Mercer entered. He doffed his hat to his employer, then hung it up, stripping off his black gloves. At a gesture from Beckett, the operative took the seat beside Beckett's desk. "I suppose you heard," Beckett said.

"I did, Mr. Beckett," Mercer said. "And I have to point out, that before Sparrow left, I said that—"

Mercer broke off at Beckett's warning gesture. "Mr. Mercer," Beckett said, his voice very soft and even, "I believe it's possible you were on the verge of saying something along the lines of 'I told you so.' I should be derelict in my responsibility to a valued subordinate if I did not warn you that such impertinence would be cause for immediate dismissal. Have I made myself *clear*, Mr. Mercer?"

Ian Mercer's eyes widened slightly. "Aye, Mr. Beckett," he said, nodding for emphasis. "I wouldn't dream of saying any such thing."

“I trust not.” Beckett folded his hands together on his deck. “Please, go on, Mr. Mercer.”

“Yes, Mr. Beckett. I was about to say that the first thing I’ll need to do is have a talk with our man, Newton. Did you receive any letters from him?”

“None yet, but you know it might take another two months or more. Yes, I believe you should indeed have a long talk with Mr. Newton. And then I’ll want to begin interviewing Captain Sparrow’s crew. I feel sure that he is lying about something, and, thus, there are bound to be discrepancies between what he’s told us and what his crewmen say. I’ll want to start as soon as possible.”

“Where shall I send them for these interviews, Mr. Beckett?”

Beckett considered for a moment. “Since some of the subjects we’ll need to cover might be…sensitive…in nature, I’ll use the library, Mercer. You can bring them up from the docks by twos and threes, and the ones not being interviewed can wait in the EITC office next door.”

“Yes, Mr. Beckett. I’ll go down there immediately.”

“I’m eager to get to the bottom of this, Mr. Mercer. I’ll start with Greene and Connery, the mates. After that, we’ll take the helmsmen, and then go on from there, working though a representative sample of the able seamen, then the ordinary seamen.”

“Very good, Mr. Beckett. I shall arrange it.”

* * *

Cutler Beckett nodded pleasantly at Frank Connery, but did not smile. “Good afternoon, Mr. Connery. Please, take a seat.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Beckett.” The big, grizzled second mate perched uneasily on the indicated chair.

“Mr. Connery, I’d like you to tell me the story of your most recent voyage under Captain Sparrow, please.” Beckett dipped his quill in ink, and regarded the man expectantly.

Connery eyed the pen and parchment uneasily. “Am I in some sort of trouble, Mr. Beckett?”

“You? No, no. Nothing like that, Mr. Connery. I simply need to do a bit of fact-checking. There are some things about your most recent voyage that don’t seem to add up, so to speak.”

Connery nodded, and began giving his account. He seemed to be articulate enough. He’d obviously had some education. Loquacious, however, he was not. He finished his account in less than five minutes.

“I see, Mr. Connery,” Beckett said. “Tell me more about this attack by pirates. Did it seem in any manner atypical of pirate attacks you might have experienced or heard accounts of ?”

Connery nodded. “Mr. Beckett, the pirate was one of those rogues. Flew a red flag with a horned demon on it. Didn’t seem to care about taking our cargo. Just seemed to want to sink us.”

“I see. Did Captain Sparrow try to evade them? Did he fight back?”

“He did, sir. Northwest Providence Channel can be treacherous. The Bahamas have a lot of shoal waters around those islands. The captain, he out-sailed ’em—ran ’em aground. But then we run aground, too.”

“I see.” Beckett took notes.

Connery shook his head. “Pure bad luck, it was, Mr. Beckett. Reckon it was the Good Lord saved us. Or maybe it was that Ayisha woman. Some said as how she put a curse on the pirate, and blew up his powder magazine.”

Beckett scribbled. “I see, thank you. What did you think of Captain Sparrow’s judgment and seamanship in how he dealt with the pirate vessel?”

“He did what I would have done, Mr. Beckett, ’cept he knew those waters better than I do. So he did it better. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here talking to you today.”

Beckett looked up. “Now…about the fact that apparently a different pirate vessel turned up and saved you. What can you tell me about that?”

Connery shrugged. “The pirate captain was a woman, sir. Seemed she’d met Captain Sparrow before. She sent her men in, to help us with our repairs. And her surgeon to help with our wounded.”

“What did she look like, this female captain?”

Connery cleared his throat. “She was…pretty…sir.”

“Regarding your vessel, Mr. Connery. Was it in serious danger of sinking?”

“Yes, sir. As long as we worked the pumps, she was holding her own. But the men were weary, and almost everyone had gotten hurt a bit. Seven seriously wounded. Three dead. Doubt our remaining men would have been able to keep us afloat, Mr. Beckett. Boats were smashed. Bad situation.”

“I see.” Beckett wrote another note. “So, under the circumstances, you agreed with Captain Sparrow’s decision to accept the assistance of a pirate vessel?”

“Did what I would have done, Mr. Beckett. Captain Sparrow…he’d never have let the *Wench* go down, if he had to hold her up with his own hands.”

“Very well. Thank you, Mr. Connery, I think that will be all.”

“Good day to you, Mr. Beckett.”

Cutler Beckett dipped his quill into the inkwell. “Thank you for your report, Mr. Prescott. I have just a few more questions for you.”

Prescott looked apprehensive, but nodded.

“Now, then…I’d like you to explain in more detail just what it was like when you went into this…fogbank, you called it.”

Beckett watched the man's face. Prescott shivered at the memory. "Mr. Beckett, when we all woke up from being asleep on the deck, we looked for that Obeah woman, and her brother, and the big fella. None of 'em was to be found. Our mate Chamba, he was gone, too. So was a longboat. The captain, he said that you had ordered him to go to this island and get a look at it with his own eyes, so we'd have to go into the fogbank. None of us liked that idea much, but orders is orders, sir. We sailed in."

"What was it like?"

"Terrible, sir. It was like it was a cursed place, or something. You couldn't scarcely tell up from down. Everything was gray. In the grayness, you could see things… out of the corner of your eye, you know? Misshapen things, monstrous…" Prescott swallowed, then shook his head. "And we all heard…things…"

"What did *you* hear, Mr. Prescott?"

The man looked down at his big, work-roughened hands, twisted together on the top of the table in the library. "Please don't laugh, Mr. Beckett, but I could have swore I heard my sainted mother crying out to me, to go back. Like she was warning me. Been dead for twenty year, she's been."

"You turned back quickly, after entering the fogbank?"

"Yes, sir. And, begging your pardon, sir, thank God for it. Otherwise I don't think we'd have gotten out."

"If you hadn't turned back, what do you think would have happened to the ship?"

Prescott shook his head. "I think we'd have been lost in there, past all getting out. We'd have all gone mad. And then we'd have died, Mr. Beckett."

Beckett's quill scratched on the parchment. "I see. Thank you, Mr. Prescott. That will be all."

Cutler Beckett regarded Lucius Featherstone quizzically. “You say you saw Captain Sparrow fight a sword duel with a *what*?”

“A ghost sir. A revenant, that’s what they calls ’em. Came out of that haunted fogbank. Must have, sir. That fogbank, it was haunted right enough. My friend, Etienne de Ver, he said that there’s an old fortress near where he grew up in France that was haunted. He said that he—”

“Mr. Featherstone, I asked you about this apparition that came aboard that same night. Can you please describe it, and then tell me you *why* you believe it was not simply a man?”

Featherstone rubbed his grizzled chin thoughtfully. “It *looked* like a man, sure enough. Tallish, wearin’ fancy clothes. One of them lace-trimmed shirts. Big hat, with a plume.”

Beckett nodded. “Excuse me a moment.” He rose and went into his office, then returned with two items. “Do you recognize these, Mr. Featherstone?”

“Yes I do, Mr. Beckett! That’s the coat and hat the revenant was wearing!”

Beckett made a note. “So why are you sure it was a… revenant?”

“Well, hadn’t we been in a fogbank that was full of spirits just that day, sir? And how could any flesh and blood man get hundreds of miles off the coast of Africa in a dinghy? Doesn’t make sense, sir.”

“There is that,” Beckett admitted. “You say you heard Captain Sparrow speak to the, um, revenant. What did they say?”

“The cap’n, he told it to leave his ship or he’d be killing it. The ghost, he didn’t pay no mind. Next thing I know, the two of them are fighting, all over the weather deck. It was a scary sight, in the moonlight.” Featherstone shook his head, admiringly. “That revenant was a bloody good fencer, Mr. Beckett. For a while there, I thought the captain would lose.”

Then the man realized what he'd said, and colored. "Oh, I'm *sorry*, sir! Pardon my language, sir. I shouldn't have expressed myself so…vulgar."

Cutler Beckett waved his concern away. "Quite all right, Featherstone. I've been exposed to sailors for years. So afterward, Captain Sparrow ordered you and Mr. de Ver to clean up the blood from the, um…the loser, is that correct?"

"Yes, Mr. Beckett."

"Did it seem like real blood?" Beckett couldn't conceal the faint edge of sarcasm in his voice, but he needn't have worried; Featherstone was oblivious.

"Smelled like it, yes, sir. It was dark, though."

"So it is possible your night visitor was, in fact, a man, not a ghost?"

Featherstone shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Beckett. 'Tis well known that ghosts and spirits of the damned can menace honest mariners, trying to steal their souls. If Captain Sparrow hadn't courageously fought that revenant, it would have taken over the ship, and we'd all have never been seen by mortal eyes no more. But Captain Sparrow, he'd do anything to save his ship from such a fate."

"Um…I see." Beckett made a note. "Thank you, Featherstone. That will be all."

"Yes, Mr. Beckett."

Cutler Beckett regarded Jack Sparrow, who was once more standing before him. He didn't offer him a seat this time, either. "Captain Sparrow, I've reviewed your logbook, and related paperwork. And I've spoken to some members of your crew."

"Yes, Mr. Beckett."

"I have a few questions for you."

"Yes, Mr. Beckett."

“How well did you get to know Ayisha before she… departed?”

Sparrow looked startled. “I—what do you mean, Mr. Beckett?”

“Did she learn enough English on the voyage that you could speak to her directly? Some of your men said she mended their clothes for them. They said when she saw them on deck, she would say good morning. And when they thanked her for mending their clothing, they believed she understood them.”

“Oh, I see what you meant, sir. She did start speaking some English, yes, but mostly things like ‘good day’ and ‘thank you,’ and suchlike. When she wanted to tell me anything requiring real information, she spoke pidgin to my crewman, Chamba.”

“The ex-slave that disappeared with her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Beckett steepled his fingers. “Obviously she was not a half-wit,” he mused aloud.

“No, Mr. Beckett,” Sparrow said. “Far from it. I believe, now, that she had the whole thing planned out from the beginning.” He sighed. “She fooled me, just as much as she fooled you and Mr. Mercer.”

“By the way, Captain Sparrow, whatever happened to those earrings?”

Sparrow shook his head, obviously chagrined. “I gave them to her, Mr. Beckett, shame on me for being fooled. That’s the first time I ever gave a woman jewelry, sir, and I assure you, it will be the last.”

“I see.” Beckett looked back down at his notes. “Captain Sparrow, why didn’t you mention the incident that happened the night following the Zerzurans’ disappearance? Apparently you had a visitor, though the accounts differ regarding…him.”

Sparrow cleared his throat. “Um…they do?”

“Yes. Or perhaps I should say, concerning *it*. Not many of your crew were present that night, apparently, but those that were seemed to think that some kind of…” Beckett waved derisively, “…ghost…or something…came aboard, and that you fought a sword duel with it. Him. One man insisted it was a Frenchman. The others insisted it was a ghost who took on the guise of a Frenchman. And apparently the intruder wore these clothes.” Beckett reached into his drawer and removed a somewhat squashed hat with a plume, and an elegant satin gentleman’s coat. “Why didn’t you mention this encounter?”

Sparrow sighed. “I’m sorry, Mr. Beckett. I didn’t say anything about it because I was…ashamed. Sir.”

Beckett blinked. “*Ashamed*? Of what, pray tell?”

“Well, Mr. Beckett, you’ve always been so square with me, treating me like a…professional, I suppose you’d say. Another man of business, not like an ignorant, superstitious sailor. It’s meant a lot to me this past year, Mr. Beckett, to have you treat me like I was…almost…sort of…equal to an educated gentleman like yourself, sir. So I didn’t want to admit that…” He shrugged, spreading his hands, palm up.

“Admit *what*?”

“It *was* a ghost, Mr. Beckett. A revenant, we call ’em. Ghostly visitations do happen, sir, on the sea. Strange things, things that can’t be explained.”

Beckett folded his hands on the ebony deck. “Go on, Captain Sparrow, by all means. I want to hear the full story.”

“Sir, ’twas the ghost of me old fencing master from Marseilles. He died angry at me, sir, some years ago, and he’s been haunting me.”

Beckett nodded slowly. “Angry, you say. Why?” *I could sympathize with the poor specter*, he thought, sardonically, *if I believed any of this for one moment.*

“Well, Mr. Beckett, I didn’t pay his bill. I meant to, sir, honestly I did, but I was temporarily…embarrassed…as to funds, so to speak. And me ship was leaving with the tide.

So I left him a note, all signed proper, sir, and sailed away, resolving to come back to Marseilles as soon as possible, to settle me debt."

"I'm sure you had the best of intentions," Beckett murmured. "Do continue, Jack."

"I did have, Mr. Beckett! And I did go back, as soon as ever I could. But when I returned, I discovered that the poor chap had died. Terrible thing, it was." Sparrow shuddered expressively. "Seems he was walking down by the docks one evening, and a doxy stabbed him and took his purse. Only he didn't die immediately, you see. He went off his head, and died the next day, and somehow he'd gotten me and this…lady of the evening…mixed up in his head. So he thought I was the one what did him in. When I went back to settle me debt, they told me he died cursing me name."

"And he's been haunting you?"

"I'd see him in me dreams, Mr. Beckett, demanding his money, and holding out his bloody hands to me, saying, 'Jack, why did you murder me?' It was terrible, sir. I'd wake up in a cold sweat. So when we went into that fogbank, Mr. Beckett, that's who I saw. Me old fencing master. I think he followed us out of that fogbank. And then attacked me that very night."

"I see. This is a truly…remarkable…account, Captain Sparrow. I didn't know it was even possible to kill a ghost. Or a 'revenant,' as you term them. I mean, they're already dead, aren't they? Doesn't dispatching one require a… what's the word…an exorcism?" Cutler Beckett cocked his head at Jack, inquiringly. It was fascinating, watching that fertile brain come up with such utterly inspired codswallop.

Sparrow didn't even pause to think. "Oh, no, Mr. Beckett. Haven't you ever heard of the power of cold iron over eldritch things?"

"Of course," Beckett said. "When you put it like that, it all makes sense."

Sparrow nodded earnestly.

Cutler Beckett sat back in his seat, regarding the captain, thinking. So far his investigation had yielded exactly…nothing. Samuel Newton had confirmed to Mercer that although Sparrow's behavior had at times been secretive, all the events he'd observed tallied with Sparrow's account of the voyage. All the crewmen Beckett had interviewed had given accounts that agreed with Sparrow's report.

But you're lying to me, Jack. You know it. I know it. And I suspect you know that I know it—but that my hands are tied, because I can't prove it. Beckett tapped his fingers thoughtfully on his desk, wondering whether Sparrow would start to fidget, or twitch. But as the moments stretched on, Sparrow just continued to stand there, as though he could do it all ruddy day. *So all of that earlier fidgeting and hat twisting you did was just a performance, Jack, to prove how nervous you felt, and how sincere you were. Bravo, you smug, arrogant blighter.*

Beckett banked down his anger. Jack Sparrow would pay for whatever he'd done, yes he would. He picked up his notes and glanced through them, all the while mulling over the best way to make sure Sparrow learned his lesson. *You forget whom you're dealing with, Jack. I'm the Director for West African Affairs for the East India Trading Company. You think I have to swallow this folderol you've handed me, and that we'll just go on from there? Think again, Jack. You're due for a good humbling, you swaggering young cockerel. And I know just how to hand you one, starting now. As a matter of fact, I can think of several ways….*

Beckett cleared his throat. "There's just one more thing, Captain Sparrow."

Sparrow looked politely attentive. "Yes, Mr. Beckett?"

"One of the men I spoke to said that you were wounded in the sword-fight. How serious was the wound? Where was it located?"

“Two minor wounds,” Sparrow touched a spot on his neck, then another, high on his left arm, just below the shoulder. “I’m fine now.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t mind proving that, Captain?”

“Proving what?”

“That both wounds are healed, and you’re fit for your next voyage. Take off your coat, please.”

Sparrow obediently removed his coat, then walked over and hung it up on the hat and coat stand in the corner, his expression blank. “Now your waistcoat, please.” Again, the captain complied.

Beckett rose from his chair, walked around the desk, then over to stand beside him. “Now your neckcloth and shirt, Captain Sparrow, if you would be so kind.”

Sparrow’s expression had gone stony, but he took off his neckcloth, then unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off his shoulders. The smooth-skinned torso thus revealed was lean and fit, not a spare ounce on it. Beckett gazed intently, noting the tiny scar between Sparrow’s collarbones. Then he focused on his left shoulder, where there were two scars, fairly close to each other. The lower one was about the size of a shilling and roughly circular. The other was a thin, brighter red line about an inch higher.

Unable to stop himself, Cutler Beckett stepped closer, raising his hand. “Which one is from the swordfight?” he asked. “This one?” He brushed the roughly circular mark, barely grazing it with his fingertips, “Or this one?” He touched the narrow red line.

Sparrow’s control abruptly deserted him, and he flinched away, giving Beckett an outraged glance, before looking down. He moved sideways, fetching up about two feet from his employer. “It’s the topmost one.” A wave of dull red darkened his skin, starting just above the little scar, suffusing his whole countenance.

Beckett stepped back. “I see,” he said. “Exactly as described. Well, thank you, Captain Sparrow, for your

cooperation. You'll understand, of course, that I did have to check."

Sparrow didn't reply as Beckett went back to his desk and resumed his seat, only busied himself buttoning his shirt, retying his neckcloth, then shrugging on his waistcoat. His eyes were as expressionless and dull as unpolished agate.

"Well, Captain Sparrow," Beckett announced, briskly, "that concludes my investigation, and you've been vindicated. You've proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that you were telling the truth all along. So I owe you an apology. Of course I'm gravely disappointed about not finding Kerma, and the treasure, but, nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they say." Beckett rose from his seat. "I'm sorry I misjudged you, Jack," he said, and extended his hand across the desk. "Will you accept my apology?"

Gravely, the two men shook hands. Beckett smiled warmly. It was not returned.

Sparrow returned to the corner to don his coat and pick up his hat, clearly expecting to be dismissed. "Just a moment, Captain," Beckett said. "Wouldn't you like to discuss your next cargo and assignment?"

"Oh! Yes, of course, Mr. Beckett," Sparrow said. He came back to stand in front of the desk.

"Please, have a seat," Beckett invited.

Sparrow sat down. Beckett opened a drawer, rifled quickly through a file, then selected a sheet of parchment. "Ah! Here we go. Captain Sparrow, I know your thoughts on this matter, but I fear I have no choice but to insist. This letter is from Lord Penwallow, and, as you will hear, he has asked for you specifically."

Beckett began reading aloud: "'Accordingly, will you please begin gathering a cargo of approximately two hundred prime Blacks for shipment to my new plantation on New Avalon? At least one hundred and fifty will need to be prime strong Bucks, and the rest may be Wenches,

preferably those of gentle nature, and trainable in the Arts of keeping a Civilized Household. Montgomery will need the cargo before the spring planting is to begin. If your Captain Sparrow is available to take them, that would also be most Pleasing to me. That young mariner is so careful with cargo, I feel sure that under his Oversight, we will lose no more than, one hopes, a quarter of the cargo during the Crossing.'"

Sparrow was already shaking his head. "No. No, I'm sorry, Mr. Beckett, but I can't do that. Lord Penwallow said, 'If your Captain Sparrow is available to take them.' I'm not available, and that's your out. Find another captain."

"I'm afraid there isn't anyone else, Captain Sparrow," Beckett said, putting the letter down. "All of my ships are out of port. As soon as I received the bearings you provided for the proximate location of Kerma, I gave orders for my expedition to assemble, then sail northward. Surely you noticed when you tied up that the *Wicked Wench* is the only ship currently occupying the EITC dock?"

Sparrow shook his head yet again. "Well, another ship is bound to show up within a few days, Mr. Beckett. Besides, the *Wench* isn't fitted to haul…that type of cargo."

Cutler Beckett shook his head, in turn. "I am sorry, Captain. I checked my scheduling, and we're not expecting any other ships to return for at least three weeks, and probably more. As the saying goes, my hands are tied. Mr. Mercer just completed the purchase of His Lordship's order. We must ship that cargo out. The longer they stay in Calabar, overcrowded into the holding pens, the greater the chance of some pestilence wiping out the whole lot of them."

Sparrow was staring at him, evidently realizing that Beckett wasn't going to back down this time. The captain wet his lips. "No, Mr. Beckett. I won't do it. I'm sorry to have to do this, but I formally resign my position as an EITC captain."

“Captain Sparrow, there is something you need to consider before you do that,” Beckett said. “I’ve been sheltering you from an unpleasant truth, I fear, because of your exemplary work for me in the past. When an EITC captain loses more than one cargo within the span of a year—for any reason, even pirate attacks—the company has the option of charging him for the cost of the lost second cargo. It’s a clause we included to protect us against incompetent mariners. Check your contract.”

“But—”

Beckett raised a hand, cutting him off. “Captain Sparrow, I’m willing to make it worth your while to carry Lord Penwallow’s order. But if you refuse, even if you resign, you will still owe us for the muscovado sugar you lost. And that sum comes to…” He checked an account book, then did a quick mental calculation. Then he named a sum. Admittedly, he padded it a bit, just for the enjoyment of seeing Sparrow’s eyes widen, and hear him gasp softly.

“Mr. Beckett, I don’t have that much,” Sparrow said. “It would take me *years* to earn that much.”

“I’m sorry, Captain. If you resign, you will owe us this sum. If you refuse to take a rightfully assigned cargo, you’ll owe it, too. But…” Beckett tried to sound reassuring. “If you make this one trip for me, Captain Sparrow, and thus make it possible for me to honor Lord Penwallow’s request, then I will promise you, on my word as a gentleman, that I won’t ever ask you to do it again. If I had another captain to take this cargo I would hire him, but, as you can see for yourself, I don’t.” Beckett spread his hands and shrugged slightly.

Sparrow sat there. His face was under control, but he couldn’t hide the look in his eyes. If Beckett hadn’t been so focused on humbling, nay, *taming* the EITC’s West African “free spirit”—as he’d come to think of Jack—he might have felt sorry for him. *My Sparrow has just discovered the limits of his cage, I fear….*

Beckett leaned back in his seat, watching Sparrow's internal struggle for a few minutes. *Time for the* coup de grâce*....*

"I can see this is difficult for you, Jack," he said. "I *am* sorry to have to demand this of you. I'm realizing that this voyage may be a genuine ordeal for you, and I'd like to show that I appreciate your sacrifice for the company. So I'll make you a proposition. I know you'd like to have a ship of your own. If you will command the *Wicked Wench* to deliver Lord Penwallow's cargo, I'll sign her over to you. You will own her, Jack."

Sparrow's eyes widened, and his mouth fell open. "You'd do that, Mr. Beckett?"

"I would," Beckett said. "I will. All you have to do is take her on this one voyage, and then come back here. Look." He opened another drawer in his desk and withdrew a file. "Here is the title to her. The day you return from the successful completion of this voyage, I will sign this over to you. For the sum of, let's say, a shilling. Just to keep everything perfectly legal."

Jack Sparrow was looking dazed. "I…I…"

"You want her, right?"

"Yes, yes, I do."

Beckett heard the fierceness underlying his voice.

"I can't make you a better offer than this one, Jack. You'd be mad not to take it."

"I would be," Sparrow said. "Excuse me for a moment." He stood up, then strode over to the corner, and stood staring at the blank wall, fists clenched.

Cutler Beckett watched him, wondering what he'd decide. He rather thought he knew, but Jack had surprised him before, he recalled.

Eventually Sparrow turned back around and walked back to the deck. "All right, Mr. Beckett," he said, his voice low, and rough with repressed emotion. "You have yourself a

deal. I'll deliver Lord Penwallow's cargo. Just this one time. Never again. Savvy?"

"Perfectly, Jack," Beckett said. He held out his hand. "Shall we shake on it, then?"

Sparrow stared at the proffered hand as though it were a snake. Finally he shook his head. "My apologies, Mr. Beckett," he said, quietly, "but I would not feel right, doing that. I am sorry."

"That's all right," Beckett said, his tone kindly, understanding. What did he care about a handshake? He'd won! Sparrow was humbled. There was no mistaking that look in his eyes. He was trapped, as surely as a wild creature with its neck in a snare. "I understand that this will be difficult for you, Jack. I want to do everything I can to make it easier on you. I will provide you with experienced men to handle the cargo. You won't have to do anything except sail the *Wench*."

"Yes, sir," Sparrow said.

"We'll be spending the next few days doing some refitting of the ship, Jack. Nothing that can't be undone, don't worry. So find yourself something else to do, and give your crew shore leave."

"All right, Mr. Beckett."

Jack spent the next four days trying to crawl into a bottle of rum. He was so surly that even Robby stopped talking to him, but the first mate refused to leave him alone, either. Thanks to Robby, Jack usually passed out in his own cabin each night, rather than on the streets of Calabar.

Each day, when the teams of carpenters came aboard his ship, Jack left before they could walk up the gangplank.

He'd informed his crew about the *Wicked Wench*'s next cargo, and some of them quit when they heard about it. Frank Connery and a topman quit, citing personal objections to the institution of slavery. Five more men, including the

cook and Roger Prescott, left because hauling slaves was *dangerous*, and they knew it. There had been slave rebellions aboard ships before, and in several instances all or most of the crew had been killed. But the greatest danger to the crew of a slaver was pestilence. Slaves often became sick, and then the illness would spread to the crew. It wasn't all that unusual for a third of the slaves and the same percentage of the crew to perish during the five or six weeks of the Atlantic crossing.

Robby quickly hired hands to replace those who had quit. Cutler Beckett, true to his word, provided a small crew of six "handlers" who would be responsible for the slaves—feeding them, seeing that they were exercised each day, and so forth.

None of Jack's crew spoke pidgin, and the captain ordered his men to stay clear of the cargo hold. "Just concentrate on your work, mates," he told them. "That's what I'm going to do."

Jack was in a tavern, drinking, when they loaded the cargo aboard the *Wench*. As he'd ordered, Robby dispatched a crewman to fetch him when the slaves were all aboard, and only then did he return to his ship. He wasn't falling-down drunk, but he was definitely numb.

The *Wicked Wench* set sail from Calabar, with a cargo of shackled human beings, crowded together like cattle, in her hold.

As if reflecting Jack's mood, the weather turned foul almost immediately. There wasn't much thunder or lightning, but there was wind and driving rain as they sailed beneath the bulge of Africa. It rained for almost a week, on and off, and the *Wench* sailed with her hatches battened down against the wind and the water.

Jack spent a lot of time up on deck. Sailors were used to being wet. And the flask he carried, tucked into Amenirdis's sash, kept chills away.

Their first day out, Jack went below, intending to inspect the hold. He'd done that for every cargo he'd ever hauled. He'd bucked himself up by remembering Cutler Beckett's promise that the *Wicked Wench* would be his.

Even though Jack now had many times the price of the ship stashed in his cabin, he knew he wouldn't dare to turn any of that Kerman gold into pounds sterling—at least not any time soon. He knew Beckett was having him watched. So having Beckett give him the ship would solve many problems for him. His first voyage, he resolved, would be to sail to the other side of the world—as far away from Africa as he could get.

So after he'd steeled himself to perform his customary inspection of the hold, Jack paused on the ladder to borrow a little liquid courage—and numbness—from the flask, tipping nearly half of the rum down his throat.

Only then did he continue on his way down the ladder.

As he reached the bottom, though, and prepared to step out into the hold, he *heard* them. The dank, dark air was filled with the sounds of hushed, fearful conversations in languages he didn't understand, mixed with anguished moans, whimpers, groans of pain, and agonized weeping.

There wasn't enough rum in all the world, Jack discovered, that would give him the ability to enter his own cargo hold. He turned and fairly fled back up, all the way to the weather deck, where he stood for twenty minutes, hat in hand, his face lifted to the rain, hoping its touch could make him feel clean.

After that aborted attempt to reassert his normal routine, Jack roamed his own ship like a lost soul, standing his watches, but retreating to his cabin when the slaves were brought up on board and forced to "dance" for exercise. At night, unless he managed to pass out, he lay awake, his fingers tracing the bezel of the ring Amenirdis had given him.

They hadn’t managed to replace Roger Prescott, so, on their third day of steady rain, Jack decided to go up on the quarterdeck and relieve Matthews so the man could go below, get into clothes that at least were not dripping, and rest. The idea of taking a helm watch cheered him; it would give him something to do besides wander his own weather deck, squelching in rain-sodden shoes, imagining he could hear sounds from the hold.

But, when Matthews ceded him the wheel, and Jack stepped into place at the helm, the ship felt…different. The *Wicked Wench* had always been yar—quick and responsive to her helm, a pleasure to steer. But when he took the wheel this time, her yar was gone. She felt sluggish, her response to the wheel almost labored, as though the ship was… oppressed.

Frowning, he experimented, turning the wheel to port, then starboard, watching the compass. Jack had always fancied that his *Wench* responded to his touch joyfully, like a human wench with her lover, by turns coy and flirtatious, bold at times, at times shy, needing to be tenderly coaxed. This ship felt like a…*thing*. Merely a wooden construct with canvas sails…and nothing more. Lifeless.

Jack tried to tell himself that the difference had to be due to the way the “cargo” was distributed. Perhaps her ballast had shifted while they’d been working on her….

Matthews, who had been watching as Jack experimented, nodded. “Aye, Cap’n, you feel it too, don’t you? She’s not respondin’ the way she used to.”

Jack glanced at the man, relieved to know that he wasn’t completely imagining the whole thing. “I feel it,” he admitted. “She doesn’t feel yar anymore.”

“Must be the way the cargo’s placed,” Matthews said.

“Must be,” Jack agreed. “It will be a relief to have this voyage over.”

“Truer words were never spoken, Cap’n,” Matthews agreed. “Before, this was a happy ship. We were all

shipmates. Now, with Roger and Chamba and Mr. Connery gone, she don't seem like the same vessel."

Jack nodded sadly.

Finally, on the afternoon of their sixth day at sea, as the *Wicked Wench* approached the point where Jack would order them to turn northwest and start up the African coast, the rain stopped. The sun came out. Magically, the seas turned from greenish gray to sparkling blue. The captain felt his spirits rise as he ordered the crew to remove the hatch and ladder covers, so as to get some light and air circulating aboard the ship.

Jack hadn't reckoned on the fact that when the hatches were uncovered, and the air from the holds was free to move upward, it would bring sounds—and smells—with it.

He was up on the bow, his octant in hand, taking sun sightings, when a wave of stench, so strong it should have been visible, struck him with almost tangible force. It was like having the contents of a chamber pot flung in his face. Jack gasped in shock, and instantly regretted it.

Clapping his hand over his mouth and nose, he bolted for the railing, then leaned over and heaved until his stomach was empty, then retched till he gagged on bile. Jack had never been sick a day in his life, never vomited before, except when he'd been totally inebriated, and even then he could count the number of times on the fingers of one hand.

He almost dropped his precious octant over the side.

Finally, he spat a last time, then wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt and straightened up—only to have his knees nearly buckle. He leaned against the railing, eyes closed, breathing through his mouth, afraid to look around and see whether any of his crew had witnessed that disgraceful exhibition.

"Feel better now?" It was Robby's voice.

Jack nodded. "Think so. I'm going to my cabin for a few minutes. Have to put away my octant."

“You’re not on watch, Jack,” Robby said, walking along beside him as Jack made an unsteady way down the ladder from the bow, along the weather deck. The captain unlocked his cabin with trembling hands, then went in. After carefully stowing his octant in his sea chest, Jack collapsed onto his chair. He took out his flask and sipped carefully, mindful of his thoroughly empty stomach.

The few swallows of rum helped. After a minute, he straightened and opened his eyes. “That’s a little better.”

“You do look better,” Robby agreed. “I’ve never seen anyone so green in my life.”

“Don’t remind me,” Jack said. “I assure you that I sincerely regret all those times I’ve laughed at lubbers who nearly turn themselves inside out, feeding the fish.”

“It’s an awful smell,” Robby said.

“Ships will be able to tell what we’re hauling for miles,” Jack said. He slumped forward, holding his head in his hands. “May all the forces of Hades and Hell damn Cutler Beckett for eternity, Robby,” he muttered. “May he die alone, and have no one to mourn him.”

“Pretty strong curses, Jack,” Robby observed.

“I hope they bloody well come true,” Jack said, in a savage undertone. “You should have seen him that day, Robby. I never fooled him. He knew I was lying about something, even if he couldn’t prove it. So he set out to grind me into the muck, just like he’d squash a bloody cockroach. Sodding little wanker.” He dropped his hands.

Robby raised his eyebrows. “The only other man I’ve ever seen that made you this angry was Christophe, Jack.”

“Don’t think I haven’t fantasized about running the little git through, Robby.”

“I’d be surprised to find that he knows how to fence,” Robby said.

“I can’t go back to work for him,” Jack said. “Even if he keeps his word and signs over the *Wench*, the ship’ll be…

tainted for me. He's ruined her. I took a hand steering her, and she's lost her yar, Robby."

Robby sighed. "I guess we could have predicted this. You know how much he wanted to find that island. But Cutler Beckett is already rich and powerful. Why does he need more?"

"I think wielding power and manipulating people are the only things that give him pleasure," Jack said, "And he won't be satisfied till I'm broken to his will."

"What are you going to do, Jack?"

"I can't let him win," Jack said. "I can't let him beat me and suck the life out of my ship. I just *can't*, Robby." After a moment, Jack's bowed shoulders straightened, then he sat up, tossing his hair back from his eyes. "I can't take those *people* to New Avalon, either."

"So what are you going to do?"

Jack tapped his fingers on the tabletop for a minute, then got up and restlessly paced back and forth for many minutes. Finally he halted. "I'm going to bloody let them go, Robby."

"Let them go? Where? They'll just be recaptured!"

"Not where I'm going to release them, they won't. I'm sailing for Kerma, Robby. It isn't far off our course. I'll get Amenirdis—that's Ayisha's real name—to talk her brother into giving the slaves…what do they call it…" He snapped his fingers. "Asylum. Yes."

Robby's mouth dropped open. "But Jack, we can't get back there! We tried the fogbank. It was awful! The ship will be lost!"

"Don't worry about that," Jack said. "Amenirdis gave me this," he held up the ring. "With this I can summon her, get her to come out and take these people to safety."

"And then what?"

"Then I'm stealing my *Wench* and taking her back to the Caribbean. Port Royal. I hope I can get a message to Esmeralda there. I'm going to take her up on her offer."

“But, but, what about Teague? You said you’d be hung if you tried to go back.”

“That was when Borya and Christophe were still alive. Now they’re dead, and at my hand. Well, I had help with Borya, but who’s going to know? Esmeralda said if I proved that I had made up for what I’d done, by killing the rogues I’d stupidly freed, that would be my way back to the cove, and acceptance and forgiveness by the Pirate Lords. Remember?”

Jack nodded at Christophe’s sword, hanging on the wall. “Both rogues are dead. If I steal the *Wench* I’ll be a pirate anyway. Might as well go for the whole thing, Robby.”

“But, but—”

“Robby, when I get to Port Royal, I’ll release anyone in the crew that doesn’t want to go with me. I’ll pick up enough of a crew to get the *Wench* to Tortuga, and then I’ll be able to get a full crew. It will work. I know it will!”

“I’m with you,” Robby said. “We can take some fine prizes with this ship, if we get her properly armed.”

“I was hoping you’d say that, Robby!”

Jack whirled. “Let’s get more canvas on this leaky old sow of a tub. I want me *Wench* back, and I’ll get her by reaching Kerma as quickly as possible. Robby, it will take a couple of weeks to get there. Talk to the crew. Feel them out. Find out who’s a possible candidate to help us. When we reach that fogbank, we’ll need armed men to keep Beckett’s people in line as we off-load the slaves. Can you do that?”

Robby stood up. “I’m your man, Jack,” he said. “Now and always, you know that. It’s good to hear you sounding like yourself again.”

“It’s good to feel like meself again, Robby. Hold on a moment. This calls for a toast.”

Jack quickly poured shots of rum into a couple of battered cups for himself and his first mate. “Here’s to going back on the account, Robby. I say, to hell with the Cutler

Becketts of this world, and to hell with their so-called ‘legal’ ways of doing business. Once a pirate, always a pirate. I know that now, and I swear from now on, it’s the pirate life for me!”

“To the pirate life!” Robby echoed.

They clashed their tin cups together, and drank the toast.

Jack stood on the bow of the hove-to *Wicked Wench*, staring at the bank of fog. They were less than a league from it. Plenty close enough, he decided. Closing his eyes, he thought of Amenirdis….

He pictured the white flash of her teeth as she laughed. The way her hair had coiled around his finger when he played with it. The cinnamon-brown of her skin, and the way it had felt when he kissed her. The way she tasted…her scent…her eyes…

Concentrating, Jack located his sharpest, most vivid memory of her, and focused on it, remembering the way she’d looked when she’d wrapped the sash around his waist, then looked up at him, saying solemnly, *“I will pray to Apedemak each day that my weaving will be strong enough to protect you from injury, or sickness, or harm.”*

Jack held that image in his mind, lifted the ring to his mouth, and breathed on it.

He didn’t know what he’d expected. There was no flash of communication, no answer. Jack could only trust that she’d “heard” him, and would come.

Turning, he went down off the bow, and then to his quarters, where Robby had gathered his most loyal men. Cutler Beckett’s men didn’t need to know what was going on until Jack was sure that the Kermans would rescue the slaves. If any of Beckett’s “handlers” asked why they were hove-to, Jack was prepared to fob them off with some explanation about the ship needing some kind of repair.

But as soon as he was sure that the slaves would indeed be freed today, Robby would open the arms locker and distribute weapons to Matthews, Banks, Trafford, de Ver, Featherstone, and the other crew that the first mate knew would prove loyal.

After making sure everyone understood the plan, Jack dismissed the men to wait. He stood by the bow for a while, then realized he hadn't eaten that day. Eating something would help pass the time. His new cook was, if anything, even worse than the old one had been. As soon as he was a pirate again, Jack resolved, he'd find himself a cook that could actually *cook*.

After he'd eaten, Jack went back up on deck. He forced himself to keep to a leisurely stride. No sense in warning any of Beckett's men that something was up.

Amenirdis must be on her way, Jack thought. *She might come sailing out of the fog any moment now....*

Thinking about seeing her, touching her, made him realize that his hands were filthy, his face was dirty, and he hadn't shaved in weeks. Repressing a yelp, Jack waved casually at Robby. "Going for a bit of a swim, mate," he called. Shucking off his clothes, he dived off the ship. He paddled around, rubbing at his hands, his face. His fingers left streaks of clean skin.

He didn't stay in long; the water was cold, and he still had to shave and get dressed.

By the time Jack reappeared on deck, wearing his best clothes, his hair combed, freshly shaved, it had been almost two hours since he'd used the ring. What if she never appeared? What if the ring didn't work?

Robby came over to join him. "You look much better, Jack."

"Could hardly have looked worse, mate," Jack admitted.

"True."

Jack gave his friend a glance. Robby smiled innocently.

“I’ll have to get new clothes,” Jack said, “When we get to Port Royal. Boots. Definitely boots. And a hat. A new hat.”

“Oh, boots, yes,” Robby said. “I need a new hat, too. We’ll be a dashing pair, won’t we? Ships will be lining up to be our prizes.”

Jack laughed, for the first time in nearly a month. Then he stopped abruptly, every muscle tense. “Look!” he pointed.

A ship nosed out of the fogbank. It was the *Heka*.

Jack rowed over in the dinghy. He scrambled up over the railing, and found Amenirdis, Tarek, and Chamba waiting for him. He’d never been so glad to see anyone in his life. He shook hands solemnly with Chamba, bobbed a bow at Tarek, and held out both hands to Amenirdis. “Hallo, love,” he said.

She extended her hands, and took his, her grasp warm. “Hallo, Jack. I did not expect to see you again so soon.” The princess looked at him closely, then touched his freshly shaved cheek. “There is trouble,” she said. “I feel it. You carry a weight on you. You have been hurt, Jack.”

“I have,” he confessed, and, taking a deep breath, launched into his story.

Minutes later, the *Heka* came about and glided back through the illusion-fog, taking them to the pharaoh, to see if he would give permission and pledge his help to the slaves aboard the *Wicked Wench*.

Amenirdis took Jack down to her cabin, and they sat on cushions, talking, sipping a little wine, as the yacht glided along. Jack heard all about the first Royal Progress the pharaoh had made around the island so his subjects would be able to see their new ruler. Chamba and Amenirdis were working with some of the best minds on Kerma to teach them English, so they would be able to go out into the world and learn the skills Shabako knew his people needed to know.

Jack told Amenirdis that Christophe was dead. He was surprised when she merely nodded. “You knew?” he asked.

“Did you have a vision or something?”

“No,” she told him. “But I was told by someone very powerful that Christophe had only a short time to live. That very night…his time was short, indeed.”

Jack described the events that had taken place since he’d last seen her—how Cutler Beckett was even now sending a fleet toward the bearings he’d given. “Love, they know what the illusion-fog is like,” he told her. “I believe that you will need to change the way you protect the island from detection, if that is possible. The illusion-fog might be beaten by a crew determined enough. I was able to rally my crew, shut out the bad effects to some extent, when I went back in, by concentrating on saving my ship. If I could do it, others could, too.”

She nodded. “I have been thinking much the same. But you are the one who knows how modern ships navigate. What do you think would work best?”

“If you can, make it so that any ship that approaches the island simply won’t see it. Affect their compasses, so they don’t read quite right. And do one of those illusions you told me you use when you want to go unobserved…make the eye slide past the island, unable to focus on it. Something of that sort. Make sure that even if ships come within, say, half a mile of the island, they’ll never realize what they’re looking at. Savvy?”

“Yes, Jack. All good suggestions. I will speak to the high priest about it myself, tomorrow morning.”

“Good.”

When *Heka* reached the harbor, Jack saw several chariots waiting for them. He climbed into the one that Amenirdis drove and held on as she shouted a command that sent her horses into a brisk canter. She drove the team capably, her kohled eyes bright and fearless. The chariot wheels bounced as they hit a rock. Jack held on even tighter. The princess, seeing his white-knuckled grip, smiled and slowed them a bit.

When they reached the royal palace, they were shown immediately into Shabako's presence. Jack bowed, though he didn't kneel to do it. "Your Majesty," he said, "I need your help. Cutler Beckett, the man who purchased your sister, and caused the death of your former high priest, forced me to take a hold full of slaves. Two of the poor souls have died already. I want to let them go, set them free. But if I do that anywhere in Africa, or the Caribbean, they stand a good chance of being recaptured. Can you grant them asylum here, on Kerma?"

"How many of them are there?" the Pharaoh asked.

"Not quite two hundred."

Shabako beckoned to his sister. "Please give me a moment. I must confer with my Grand Vizier."

Jack was left alone in the private audience chamber with its tall lotus columns. The painted walls seemed to reflect Old Kerma's ancient history, for the buildings stood in a desert landscape, near a great river, not on the green foothills of the island. *That must be the Nile*, Jack thought, remembering what Amenirdis had told him of her people's past. Jack remembered that long ago day when he and Christophe had talked about sailing the Nile….

The pharoah and Amenirdis returned to the chamber. Jack bowed to them, then looked over at Amenirdis, wondering what the decision would be, but her impassive countenance gave him no hint of the outcome.

Shabako regarded him gravely. "We recognize the essential goodness of your mission here, Jack Sparrow," he said, formally. "Yes, we will grant these poor captives asylum. But this island is not large. We cannot make such a gesture again. Do you understand?"

Jack closed his eyes in relief. "*Thank you*, Your Majesty," he said.

Heka reemerged from the illusion-fog at the head of a flotilla of vessels from Kerma. Every yacht, every fishing boat, and even some huge outrigger canoes had been

commandeered by the pharaoh's men. Everyone who could speak pidgin would be helping to reassure the slaves and get them safely loaded.

When Amenirdis, wearing the same clothes she'd worn to go into the labyrinth, got ready to head below with Chamba, Tarek, Shabako, and his guards, she looked at Jack. "Stay in your cabin, Jack," she said. "You have done your part."

Jack nodded. "Thank you, love. I must admit I wasn't looking forward to this."

The loading went fairly smoothly. Only two slaves panicked and threw themselves into the water, but were quickly fished out and placed into rescue vessels. Jack stood on the deck of the *Wicked Wench*, knowing that now, for good or ill, the die was cast. His old life was over…his new life, yet to begin. He felt as though he were suspended in some kind of limbo. But he felt like Captain Jack Sparrow again.

As the first of the loaded boats began heading into the fog, Amenirdis came back aboard the *Wicked Wench*.

"I believe it is going smoothly enough," she said. "I am not needed at this point. We have a few minutes to talk, Jack."

Jack glanced around at the deck of the *Wench*, at his armed crewmen, then reached down and took her hand. "Come to my cabin, love," he said.

When they stood in the cabin, Amenirdis looked around, and smiled. "It is the same. We spent so many happy hours here, did we not?"

"Well, most of them, we were asleep," Jack said, with a faint smile.

"But it was a happy sleep," she reminded him. "We lay close together."

"Yes," he said. Stepping over to her, he put his arms around her. "Come over to the bunk," he said. He felt her shake her head, and start to pull away, then added, hastily,

“I didn’t mean it that way, I swear. All I want to do is lie down with you and hold you, love. The way we did, those nights we were together.”

“All right,” she whispered.

Taking off his hat and coat, Jack slid off his shoes and lay down. The princess snuggled up next to him. Putting his arms around her, pulling her close, Jack sighed, feeling himself relax completely for the first time in a month. “This is good,” he said. “I just needed to hold you. It’s been rather horrible, love.”

“I can tell,” she said.

He buried his face in her hair. “Listen, love, I have something to tell you. Robby and I…well, we’ve got no choice, now. Setting these people free, in the eyes of the law, we’ve stolen them. That’s piracy. So we’re taking the *Wench* and heading for the Caribbean.”

“You’ll be a pirate again?”

“Yes. It’s what I am, love.”

“I know. Esmeralda knows, too.” She smiled faintly. “Everyone knew that but you, you stubborn man.” The princess pulled back a little and smiled at him. “Tell Esmeralda I send her my best when you see her, please. Tell her I am making the red silk dress, in my spare time. I may finish it in a year or so.”

Jack kissed her forehead. “I wish I could see you wear it. Maybe at some point, I’ll take the *Wench* around the world. Always wanted to do the circumnavigation thing. Just to say I’d done it.”

“And when you do, you’ll stop by and stay for a month on Kerma,” she said, brushing a stray lock of hair out of his eyes. “You will, won’t you?”

“Yes, if you want me to.”

“I will always want you to. I will always love you, Jack. That’s forever.”

He held her very tightly for a few more minutes, then it was time to go.

Saying good-bye gave him déjà vu. Jack held her hands and tried to smile, and Amenirdis did the same. Tears welled in her eyes, but she allowed none to fall.

This time there were no words; neither of them spoke.

Later, as he leaned on the rail, watching the stern of *Heka* vanish into the fogbank, Robby came over to stand beside him. “You could have gone with her, Jack,” he said, softly. “Aren’t you curious about Kerma and the Shining City? Wouldn’t you like to explore it? Ever think about just chucking it all and finding a home?”

“For about one minute, Robby,” Jack said. “But what would I do on an island, with a princess?”

“I don’t know. Marry her? Raise cute little brown-skinned children that can cast spells and swim like fish? Her brother would probably make you a duke or something. You’d have pots of money and servants. The Kermans could use a smart man, skilled in the arts of modern warfare, to teach them how to make guns and black powder. Some day they might need to fight off Cutler Beckett’s fleet.”

Jack shook his head. “Me, Captain Jack Sparrow, living on an island? In *one* place, year after bloody year? Hemmed in by a wall of illusion, Robby? With only three ruddy miles of ocean I can sail?”

Robby looked blank. “Three miles?”

“Oh, that’s right, you forgot,” Jack said. “I spent two days in Zerzura, Robby. It was a very nice place to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live there.”

“You *did what*? How…when? I forgot? Forgot *what*?”

Jack clapped him on the shoulder. “I promise I’ll tell you all about it, first opportunity we get. Right now, we should be raising sail.”

Raise sail, they did. Jack collected the weapons, then stowed them back in the arms locker.

Then he called a conference composed of himself, Robby, and Cutler Beckett’s six slave handlers. Jack was blunt with the men, telling them frankly that the *Wicked*

Wench wasn't going back to Calabar…ever. "But that's piracy!" blurted one of them.

"That's right, mate," Jack smiled at him. "And I'd just like to make things clear. When we get to Port Royal, you'll be allowed to leave the ship in peace, along with any crew members who want to leave. But if you want to eat while on this voyage, you will work, and you can start with cleaning up the hold of my ship. I wouldn't kennel a dog I liked there in its present condition, much less swag when we take our first prize. Savvy?"

Sullen muttering greeted his declaration. "Oh, and one more thing," Jack said. "Any attempt on your part to exact retribution on my loyal crew will be dealt with swiftly and severely. As captain, my retaliation for any threats or assaults on my vessel or crew would probably include, but not be limited to, keelhauling. If you don't know what keelhauling is, by all means, ask someone. Are we clear, gentlemen?"

Beckett's men affirmed that they did, indeed, understand.

The next morning found them down in the hold, with buckets of seawater, mops, and rags, assiduously cleaning. Apparently they liked eating, and wanted to continue doing it.

Early that same afternoon, Jack went up on the quarterdeck. Matthews was once more on duty. "How is she handling now, Mr. Matthews?"

The helmsman smiled. "Try her for yourself, Cap'n."

Jack stepped over and put his hands on the big wheel. Within a minute, he was smiling. "Ah," he said. "She has her yar back. A smart lady, my *Wench*. She knows what she wants, and she likes her freedom."

Jack set course for the Cape Verdes, figuring to use them as a landmark, before heading west. They reached Sal, the northernmost of the eastern group of islands, and passed it, four days later.

Jack was in his cabin the next morning, charts spread out before him, when Robby tapped at the door. “Come in,” Jack called.

Robby entered. His expression brought Jack up and out of his chair, heart hammering. “What is it?”

Robby shook his head. “Ships, Jack. They’ve spotted us, and are closing in. It’s my fault. I’d posted Jenkins as lookout this morning, but he got stomach cramp and had to come down. I intended to send someone up right away, but as I was on my way below, to wake up a man, I—”

“Stow it, Robby. Tell me later. Ships, you say? Plural?”

“Yes, four of them. Two to the west, one to the south, and one to the southeast. All flying the EITC flag. They’re closing in.”

Jack dropped his protractor. “Oh, no.”

“Beckett must have gotten word to his fleet somehow, to be on the lookout for the *Wench*, and if we were near the bearings you gave for Kerma—which we are—to come after us.”

Jack went out onto the weather deck, barefoot, in his shirt, his spyglass thrust into his sash. Grabbing the ratlines, he went up them in a rush. When he reached the yardarm, he took out the spyglass, and looked.

He’d been hoping that somehow Robby was mistaken, and yes, the first mate had indeed made an error. There weren’t four EITC ships closing in on the *Wicked Wench*. There were *five*.

The fifth ship was to the northeast. All routes of escape were blocked. Oh, they’d try to run for it. The *Wicked Wench* was fast, especially with no cargo. But the fleet Beckett had sent off to Kerma wasn’t laden with cargo, either.

The next few hours passed in a blur. The *Wench* was surrounded, and forced to heave-to. Longboats carrying contingents of armed men rowed over. With little courtesy, they searched the ship—including the cargo hold.

Cutler Beckett's slave handlers accompanied the EITC officers. Jack saw the looks they gave him, and wondered whether he might be able to make it to Sal, if he went overboard. He wasn't given the opportunity to decide, though. Brutal hands seized him.

Jack was taken into custody and locked in the brig aboard the *Sentinel*, the EITC's patrol and defensive vessel for West Africa. The *Sentinel* headed south, back to Calabar. Corporal Andrews, the marine who dragged Jack down to the orlop deck and locked him in the cell, said, good-naturedly, "There you go, Captain Sparrow. It's not too uncomfortable."

Jack stood in the cell, and looked around with a sigh. "You're right. I've been in worse."

"The *Sentinel*'s got a good cook. I'll bring you some chow, after the crew's mess."

"Thank you," Jack said. "Most kind of you."

Corporal Andrews chuckled. "Well, you're the politest prisoner I've ever locked up, I must say."

Jack managed a feeble smile. "I've had a bit of practice, mate."

Andrews left, still chuckling. Sitting down on the edge of the straw pallet, Jack leaned his head in his hands and sighed. *We were close. We were so bloody close….*

Looking around the brig, he sighed again, and muttered, "Where's that scurvy dog when you need him?" Then, lying back on the pallet, Jack closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

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Chapter Nineteen
Freedom's Price

When the **Sentinel** reached Calabar, Jack was escorted off the ship with his hands in manacles. The East India Trading Company maintained its own small but sturdily built jail for employees who were caught stealing, or committing other illegal acts. Miscreants were incarcerated there until they could be sent back to England for trial. Four burly marines from the *Sentinel* escorted him to the jail and saw him placed behind bars.

There were no other prisoners currently in residence. Jack's jailer was an old sailor who'd lost an eye and an ear. His name, Jack eventually discovered, was Joseph. He slept in the office of the little building, and his daughter, Kate, provided meals for the prisoners. Kate worked as a washerwoman at Cutler Beckett's house. After sampling his first meal as an EITC detainee, Jack decided that Kate must be a better laundress than she was a cook.

Joe the Jailer proved to be a fascinating source of sea tales and gossip—but he knew nothing of Jack's misadventures, and he didn't want to know. Cutler Beckett did not appear. Nor did Mercer. Jack began to wonder whether he'd be conveniently "forgotten" and left to languish here until he died of old age or hung himself with Amenirdis's sash. He reminded himself of all the other times he'd been incarcerated, and how something had always managed to turn up just when things looked their bleakest. That thought cheered him.

One of the worst things about being imprisoned was the lack of rum—or, indeed, any type of spirits. Jack was

thankful that he'd been living a "cleaner" life since he became a merchant captain than he ever had as a pirate. Otherwise he might have been in real trouble. He'd seen some sailors who, when deprived of drink, had gotten the shakes, hallucinating and sweating. The main thing Jack experienced, when suddenly he'd had to switch to plain water, was the inability to sleep. He had managed to go nearly a week in the *Sentinel*'s brig, unable to sleep more than a few minutes at a time. That was one of the main reasons he'd begun exercising.

After counting off the paces around the perimeter of his new cell, Jack made himself walk five miles every day. He figured out a way to chin himself on the top of the cell door. It became a challenge to figure out how to stay as fit as possible in the little cell. If his moment ever came—and surely, at some point, Joe the Jailer would grow careless, or someone would come to take him out of there for some reason—Jack wanted to be ready to run.

In time-honored prisoner tradition, he found a small shard of stone on the floor of his cell, and used it to mark off the days as they passed. He'd done the same thing while in the brig, so Jack kept a running tally.

It had been thirty-five days since his capture when they brought Robby Greene into the jail, and locked him up in the cell next to Jack's.

Jack and Robby gripped hands through their common bars, then stood there grinning at each other. "I'm glad to see you, mate," Jack confessed, "though it's a terrible thing to admit. I'd hoped they let you go."

"No such luck," Robby said. "They just locked me in the brig on a different ship, and I got to go with the *Larkspur* when they went searching for Kerma. Of course I couldn't see much, from the brig, but I saw enough to be sure they've changed the illusion, Jack."

"I told Amenirdis to," Jack said. "Did you feel anything?"

“No. All I could find out from the cabin boy, who had the responsibility of looking after me, was that they tried for five days to sail east from your bearings, and they never saw a thing. They came back to the basic bearings several times, then headed out again in overlapping directions, but found nothing. There were three ships, all crossing and recrossing each other’s wakes, sailing in circles.”

“A hopeful sign, then,” Jack said. “Maybe nobody will ever find Kerma. Do you know what happened to the *Wench*?”

“They put one of the mates from another ship aboard her and sailed her back to Calabar, Jack,” Robby said. “She’s tied up at the dock. I saw her when they brought me off the *Larkspur*.”

“Any hints as to what Beckett has in store for us?”

“None.”

“Well, all we can do is make the best of it, mate,” Jack said. “Stay in the best shape we can, in case we get a chance to make a break for it. I suppose we’ll have to steal some money. I haven’t even a ha’penny on me.”

“I have lots of money, Jack,” Robby whispered.

“You do?” Jack whispered back.

“Yes. I buried my share of the pharaoh’s reward here in Calabar. I’ll tell you exactly where, in case I don’t make it out, Jack.”

“We’ll both make it out, Robby.”

Jack’s spirits improved, now that he had someone to talk to. He and Robby talked for hours, over meals, while they walked their five miles, and when they were just sitting there, waiting for something to happen.

“Have you thought about what we should do if we get out of here, Jack?” Robby asked, one day, just after Jack had scratched off day fifty-three on the wall of his cell.

Jack shrugged. He dropped his voice, even though Joe the Jailer was at least twenty feet away, and appeared to be sound asleep, rocked back in his chair. The snores were

convincing, at any rate. “Presuming we can dig up your largesse, mate, we should probably split up. Make us harder to find.”

“But Africa, Jack,” Robby said. “Where can we go?”

“Hard question, mate,” Jack cogitated. “We might try working our way up the Western Coast, possibly catching a ship out of the nearest port north of Calabar. I’d need to look at a map.” He thought for a moment. “Assuming we do make good on our escape, where would you like to go, more than anywhere else?”

Robby’s blue eyes grew dreamy. He rubbed at his beard thoughtfully. “I guess…I guess I’d want to be back on a farm,” he said. “There is enough money for me to buy a little farmstead of my own. I’d get some geese, and ducks, maybe some turkeys…chickens, of course. Couple of pigs. I love bacon and ham. And a mule for plowing, and some milk cows.”

Robby smiled as he built his vision. “I’d grow apples and peaches. I wouldn’t eat anything but fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, and fresh bread, grown from my own wheat, Jack. No more biscuit you have to soak before you can get it down, lest it break your teeth!”

“And who would bake that bread, mate?”

“I’d find a wife. A nice girl, country born, country bred. She’d have cheeks as pink as the blush on a ripe peach, and all her teeth. She’d be the kind of girl that didn’t nag, or complain, but was a cheerful sort. With a nice shape,” Robby’s hands described curves in the air before him. “Not skinny, and not fat, either. Just a little plump, maybe, in the right places.”

“Stop it, mate, you’re torturing me,” Jack moaned, covering his eyes with his hands. “I’ve been cursing myself for a thousand kinds of a fool that the last time I saw Amenirdis, we didn’t—” He broke off, and cleared his throat. “Never you mind.”

Robby laughed. “Sorry, Jack. I’ll talk about religion, that’s sure to cool your blood. I’ll be a deacon, maybe. M’wife would sing in the choir. We’d take the little ones to services every Sabbath.” Robby stretched, then sighed. “If only we could get out of these wretched cells!”

Jack sat down beside him, on the other side of the bars, cross-legged. “You know, Robby, you might think about taking orders. You’d make a very good vicar.”

Robby turned to him, his eyes widening. “Me? A vicar? Ministering to the souls of a flock? Oh, no, Jack. You have to have an education for that. Go to a seminary, or something. The idea appeals to me, but I couldn’t do that. I’m not…fit.”

“I’ve never met anyone more fit, Robby,” Jack said. “Look at what a good influence you’ve had over me, these past five years.”

“Good influence!” Robby shook his head. “Jack, you still drink like a fish, gamble, and I long ago lost track of the wenches. Or, in the case of Esmeralda and Ayisha, ladies.”

“Ah, but think of how wicked I would have been if I hadn’t had you to slow me down, mate.”

Robby threw up his hands.

“You really should think about it, mate,” Jack urged. “You can get a country, what do they call ’em…parish. You could still have the cow, and the chickens, and”—he waved a hand—“all that. Who knows? You might be giving your sermon one Sabbath, and look out over your congregation, and there I’d be, sitting in the front pew, listening intently.” Jack grinned impishly. “And when the service is over, you can bring me home with you, and Mrs. Greene can serve me a splendid Sunday dinner. I’ll get to meet your offspring. Your stalwart sons, and your *lovely* daughter…”

“Jack, I would wall the poor girl up in the cellar before I’d let you within fifty feet of a daughter of mine. Or my wife, either,” Robby stated, with an edge in his voice.

Jack realized that if they weren’t sitting in their cells, and they were still pirates, Robby would have placed a hand

on the hilt of his sword. He raised both hands in a placating gesture. “Hold hard, come about! Robby old lad, I was *joking*.”

Slowly, Robby relaxed. Jack sat back. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “Five years of living in each other’s pockets, and all the scrapes I’ve gotten us into, and you, Robby Greene, finally lose your temper over trying to protect the virtue of a daughter you don’t even have!”

Robby stared at him in complete bewilderment. “I don’t know what came over me, Jack.”

The friends regarded each other for a long moment, then, simultaneously, they both began to laugh. Robby whooped until his ribs obviously protested, and he fell limply over onto his back. He lay there, gasping and laughing, his legs waving feebly like an overturned beetle’s.

Jack laughed too, so hard that he had to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand. He didn’t dare look at Robby, or he knew he’d go off again. Instead he sat there, wiping his eyes, still sputtering occasionally.

It was at that moment that Cutler Beckett’s men came for them.

* * *

After so long inside, Jack stared in wonderment at the Calabar River, and the vegetation on either side of it, as the *Sentinel* glided toward the Atlantic. Their hands were bound in front of them, but otherwise, they had not been ill-treated, merely locked into this small cabin on the gun deck. At least it had a porthole.

He wondered where he was being taken—and why. Had Cutler Beckett decided to simply drop them into the water, thus ridding himself of two problems?

Jack pushed his hair back from his face. It had gotten quite long while he was in the cell, and he now had a respectable beard. Robby was in like case, but he was so fair, it didn’t show as much.

He could tell when they reached the Atlantic by the change in the color of the water. The ship glided to a halt, and hove-to—or perhaps she dropped anchor. The water was fairly shallow here, within a mile of shore.

Mercer opened the door and beckoned the two of them to come along. Six EITC marines accompanied him.

Jack walked up onto the weather deck. It was good to smell the ocean breeze, he decided, after so many days of breathing the air of the jail.

His nostrils caught a whiff of smoke—something very strange for the deck of a ship. As Jack looked around, searching for the source, he saw Cutler Beckett standing over by the ladder leading to the quarterdeck. He also located the source of the smoke. There, on the port side deck, resting on a pile of stones mixed with sand, was a small charcoal brazier. A long rod was thrust into the center of the handful of glowing coals.

Jack's mouth went dry, and he glanced at Robby, who shared his reaction. This did not look good. Not at all. He swallowed, and looked off to starboard—and froze.

The *Wicked Wench* was anchored not far way—perhaps three or four hundred feet. Her chestnut-colored sides with the pale gold trim gleamed in the light of the afternoon sun, and her ivory sails were neatly furled. Jack's heart began to pound, and he was suddenly as frightened as he had ever been in his life.

Cutler Beckett nodded to Mercer. "Dismiss your men for a moment, please, Mr. Mercer."

Mercer nodded, and the six marines moved away, heading up toward the bow, out of earshot, though they could still see the captives.

Beckett strode toward Jack. Gone was any attempt at false friendliness, or subterfuge. His gray eyes were bright with fury, and he was holding a sheet of parchment in his hand.

When he reached Jack and spoke, his voice was low and intense. He radiated anger. “Jack, this letter arrived yesterday, from Lord Penwallow, my *former* patron. In it, he chastises me for not delivering his cargo.”

Jack shook his head. “People aren’t cargo, mate.”

Casually, Beckett slapped him across the face, then went on as though there had been no interruption. “He also writes to me of an incident related to him by his overseer at his estate in New Avalon. It seems that someone impersonated his son, Baron Frederick Penwallow. Lord Penwallow doesn’t have the faintest idea who that person was… but you and I do, don’t we, Jack?”

The little man was quivering, he was so angry. “Everything I’ve worked for, here in Calabar, enduring this hellish climate, getting this coast operating smoothly… everything, all that work…wasted. Gone. My chance at a title. My possible advancement. The regard of my superior in the EITC hierarchy…*gone*. All of it, *gone*. Because of *you*, Jack Sparrow.”

Beckett paused, as if waiting for Jack to say something. Jack didn’t think there was anything he could say, and his last remark had gotten him slapped, so he remained quiet.

“Oh, and by the way,” Beckett crooked a finger at Mercer, “your cabin was searched, Jack, once you were no longer occupying it. Would you like to guess what we found?”

Jack’s heart sank as Mercer carried a sack over, and began emptying it in front of him. There it was, all of the Zerzuran treasure, everything he’d—

Jack blinked. Actually, it *wasn’t* all there. They’d evidently missed one of the hiding places—the one located in the bulkhead of his cabin. It wasn’t a big hidey-hole, so he’d used it to secrete mostly coins and gems.

Beckett was silent, then suddenly, Jack felt his hand seized. “I should have noticed this before!” the EITC director said. Ruthlessly, he yanked at Amenirdis’s ring, pulling it off,

despite Jack's effort to curl his finger over it. Briefly, he examined it. "Zerzuran work. Of course…you got this when you *went* there, didn't you, Jack? You lying, scheming scoundrel! You…you…*pirate*!" He cracked Jack across the face again, this time with the back of his hand. It wasn't a very hard blow, as such things went, but it rocked him, and it stung. Jack shook his head, trying to focus.

"My captains," Beckett said, still examining the ring, turning it in his fingers, "have informed me that they have been sailing fruitlessly in *circles* for days now. Kerma is there, it must be there, but they can't find it. But *you* found it. Damn you, Sparrow!"

He spat in Jack's face.

Jack felt the thick, hot spittle hit him, perilously close to his eye, and was grateful it wasn't another blow.

Beckett held the ring up. "Who gave this to you? That ugly old crone, that seamstress? I'll bet you *charmed* her, Jack. I'll bet you did anything it took to get her to take you to Zerzura. You probably seduced her, seduced that hideous black *thing*, Jack, because you have no integrity, no decency, no honor. You *disgust* me." With a casual flip of his wrist, Beckett tossed the ring over the side of the ship.

Jack closed his eyes, grieving, bereft. Now he'd never find Kerma—or Amenirdis—again. His lovely, courageous princess…He'd never again kiss her sweet mouth, or hold her in his arms. He'd never again hear her laugh….

He took a deep breath, and it hurt. After a moment, Jack opened his eyes to find Beckett just standing there, staring at him, as if somehow realizing that something significant had occurred—but of course he didn't understand what he'd done.

Beckett motioned to the marines, and they returned to the captives. Then he nodded to Mercer. "Mr. Mercer, it's time. First, we warn the world of what Captain Sparrow truly is. *Then* we punish him."

Mercer nodded at the marines, and two of them stepped over to grasp Robby's arms. "Cut their bonds," the Scotsman instructed. "Just in case they decide to go over the side to save us the trouble of hauling them back to England, and prison."

Quickly, Jack and Robby's hands were freed. Two marines held Robby and the other four clustered around Jack. Three held him, while the fourth used his knife to cut Jack's shirt, then, with a sudden yank, ripped it off him. Mercer went over to the brazier. Picking up a rag, he grasped the end of the rod, lifting it from the glowing coals. Jack saw that the end of the brand was the letter "P."

*Oh, no. No…*Jack thought. He could smell his own fear, rank in his nostrils, and for a moment he was afraid he would disgrace himself—plead, or weep, or wet himself. But from somewhere he found the strength to stand there, silent, although he couldn't stop trembling.

"Now everyone will know what you really are, Jack," Beckett said. "I'm doing the world a service."

Mercer walked toward Jack, and Jack could tell that the operative was enjoying every moment. As the Scotsman walked past Beckett, the EITC director suddenly reached out and grabbed his black sleeve. "Let me," he said, his voice low, and thick. He sounded…avid. Greedy. Excited. "I want to do it myself."

Grasping the brand, Cutler Beckett approached. The "P" was glowing as yellow as the sun. The marines held Jack's right arm, keeping it as still as if he were bound in iron chains.

Cutler Beckett touched the iron to Jack's forearm. Jack smelled burned hair, then burned flesh. He heard the sizzle. The iron pressed harder, harder, sinking into Jack's flesh, hissing like the cobra monster from the labyrinth. The pain was so intense that for the first moments, Jack couldn't catch his breath enough to make even a faint sound. Agony erupted in his flesh, running up his arm, engulfing it. Jack's

knees sagged, and only the grasp of the marines kept him on his feet. He sucked in air, and screamed.

Jack didn't even notice when Beckett finally pulled the brand away. He was somewhere else, lost in a world of pain, and his only conscious thought was a wish that he'd pass out. But he didn't.

Mercer approached, and dumped a bucket of seawater over Jack's arm. He studied the results, then nodded at Cutler Beckett. "A good, clean, job, Mr. Beckett. Nice and deep."

Finally, the marines let Jack go. He slumped to the deck, then sat there, cradling his arm as the all-engulfing pain finally ebbed. His arm still hurt, and the sight of the blackened "P" nearly made Jack sick to his stomach, but the pain receded to a manageable level. He was able to look up to see what had happened to Robby. His friend hung in the arms of the marines, looking nearly as limp as Jack felt.

"And now, Jack," Cutler Beckett said, "it's time for your punishment." He smiled as if he were quite enjoying himself. "I confess that I'm going to miss the old hulk, but really, she's not worth all that much. It's not like she's a new ship. It's worth losing her to see you suffer, Jack."

He nodded at Mercer. "Order them to fire. Use the carcass charges."

Mercer nodded, then disappeared down the ladder leading to the gun deck.

Jack scrambled to his feet. "What?" he blurted. "What's going on?"

"Oho, so you finally speak," Beckett said. "I was beginning to think the cat had gotten your tongue, Jack."

Jack looked over at the *Wicked Wench*. "She's just a ship," he said, wonderingly. "Made of wood, and canvas. You're going to destroy your own property? Just to get back at me?"

"She's not just a ship to *you*, Jack," Beckett said. "And yes. That's precisely what I am going to do."

Jack stared at Beckett. “You’re like a child,” he said, letting the contempt he felt show. “An overgrown, angry child. Just because you can’t have what you want, you do this. It’s…twisted. Mad.”

Beckett looked at Jack. “And what is it that I want, Jack?” he asked, sounding genuinely puzzled, as though he really didn’t know.

Jack looked at him. “Fear. Love. Respect. None of which you will get from me,” he replied.

Beckett’s face darkened. His hands tightened into fists. “You—”

Three cannons roared, at nearly the same time. Jack saw the projectiles heading for the *Wicked Wench*, lying innocently, peacefully at anchor. He knew what “carcassed” ammunition was. It was a thin casing surrounding flammable material—designed to start a fire.

Mercer ran up the ladder just as two of the projectiles struck their target. The third overshot it. The Scotsman laughed. “She’s got bales of dried straw, soaked in oil, on her weather deck and main deck,” he said. “She’ll go up like paper.”

“No…” Jack whispered. The explosions echoed inside him, hurting worse than the brand. *I have to get to her!*

He lunged towards *Sentinel*’s gunwale. Hands grabbed him, but he was a wild thing, fighting as he had never fought in his life, filled with berserker rage, punching, kicking, even biting to get free. Two of the guards were down. Jack slammed his fist into the third guard’s jaw, and then he was free, bolting for the railing.

Someone moved to cut him off—Cutler Beckett himself, yelling, his face distorted with rage. He’d picked up a cutlass, and was waving it. Jack didn’t even slow down. Knocking the weapon out of his hand, he grabbed the little man by the collar and pitched him headlong over the railing.

While Beckett was still in midair, Jack leaped to the top of the rail, then dived off, arcing out, heading for the *Wicked*

Wench.

The touch of the cold water felt good, though the salt awakened the brand. Jack surfaced with a powerful kick, ignoring the fire in his arm. Behind him he could hear Mercer yelling orders.

Maybe Beckett will drown before they can fish him out….

He began swimming, then a hand grabbed his left shoulder. Jack turned, fist raised, to find Robby beside him. “Come on, Jack,” his friend panted. “It can’t be more than a mile to shore. We can make it. I’ll help you if you need it. When we get there, we’ll get the Zerzuran gold—and then we’re free.”

Jack shook his head. “You go,” he said. “I’m going after the *Wench*.”

“But Jack, she’s on fire!”

Jack turned to find it was true. Flames spouted from the weather deck, amidships. “They used straw,” he said. “I can push it overboard. I have to try.”

“No! Jack, don’t! You’ll die for nothing.”

Jack kicked off his shoes. They were weighing him down. “Then I’ll die,” he said. “I still have gold aboard. If all else fails I’ll get that.”

“Jack, please!” Robby looked frantic. “Please, come with me!”

“No!” Jack shouted. “Swim, damn you! Get your gold. Buy your farm. Earn that vicar’s collar. Marry that pretty girl. That’s an *order*, Robby.”

“No, Jack. I’ll come with—”

Robby broke off with a grunt as Jack’s bare foot kicked him hard in the stomach.

“I don’t have time to argue!” Turning away, Jack started swimming, ignoring the pain in his arm, kicking, stroking hard. He wasn’t far from the ship now…

Then he was there, at the ladder, his hands finding the wood rungs. Jack hauled himself up the ladder, clawing his

way up. By the time he got to the top, and climbed over the rail, flames had engulfed the foremast, climbing the wood as agilely as any top man.

With a gasp that was half sob, Jack turned, heading for his cabin. He was too late to save his ship. But if he was lucky, he might be able to save the gold. And then, by all that was holy, he'd *buy* a ship.

As he pelted across the weather deck, he saw that it had been stripped of everything of value. The guns were gone. The *Wench* was nothing but an empty hulk.

Jack glanced left, and saw a small figure, swimming, heading for the shore. Robby had obeyed orders, one last time. He'd escape, if there was any justice in this world….

Reaching the door to his cabin, Jack yanked at it, but it was locked.

He felt around for the key, but it was gone. Feeling heat across his back and beneath his feet, he saw the fire was roaring like a hungry monster. It was already past the main cargo hatch.

"Dammit!" Jack yelled. He threw himself at the door, once, twice, three times. He kicked it, hard, making him yell from the pain in his bruised foot. Then he threw himself against it with all his remaining strength. The lock gave.

Jack scrambled into his cabin and shut the doors behind him. There were so many things he wanted, but wouldn't be able to save! His sea chest….

Running over to the bulkhead, Jack felt around for the catch that would open the panel he'd had installed by a carpenter in London. It clicked, then opened. He began pulling things out, throwing them onto his bunk. Two small golden goblets, some jewelry, then a handful of coins and the loose gems…

Frantically, Jack ran his hand around the inside of the hiding place, making sure there was nothing left. Heading over to his sea chest, he tossed out his old clothes, then wrapped the bigger pieces in a couple of ancient shirts.

Then he stuffed the coins and jewelry into his best pair of stockings. Slamming it all back into his sea chest, Jack realized that he had no way to lock it. Hastily, he grabbed his baldric, discarding his cutlass—not without a pang—and put the heavy leather strap around it, tightening it as much as he could.

The *Wicked Wench* screamed, then groaned. His ship's cry sounded almost human. Jack dashed tears from his eyes, then grabbed the chest, and stood up with it in his arms.

Heading over to the wrecked door, Jack put out a hand to touch it, then jumped back. It was hot to the touch. Smoke trickled in beneath the doors. He coughed.

Coughing, Jack retreated, back to the stern windows. Could he get out that way?

Those windows weren't very big. Chamba had been a skinny, half-starved kid when he'd pulled him through. Jack was a grown man.

If I smash them all out, he thought, *I can jump*....

Jack put down the chest and ran over to pick up his sword. He began smashing out the glass in his windows with the hilt, hammering at it.

The ship lurched, and rolled, and suddenly Jack realized the surface of the water looked a lot closer. The *Wicked Wench* was going down.

Jack looked around his cabin, realizing he was trapped. There was no way out. His ship lurched violently, and everything in the cabin started to slide, first one way, then another. Jack crawled toward the window, dragging the chest. Somehow, he'd force himself through it.

Just as he reached the windows, Jack realized that he'd been incredibly stupid. If he jumped, holding the chest, the gold was heavy enough to carry it—and him—to the bottom.

He'd have to abandon the chest.

The entire cabin was thick with smoke, now. The ship heaved and rolled again, knocking Jack off his feet. He slid

across the deck. Jack tried to crawl toward the window, but he was disoriented, his lungs screaming for air. And somehow, he was still dragging the bloody chest with him. He couldn't seem to make his fingers let go of it.

Where were the windows? He couldn't see them….

The deck jumped and lurched. Everything slid around again, including Jack. He fetched up against the door, and the chest slammed into him. A tongue of flame erupted through the door, and suddenly his left sleeve was on fire. Yelling, gasping, Jack tried to beat out the flames with his right hand.

He heard another hideous groan, and glanced up, just in time to see the overhead skylight collapsing, coming down on top of him.

Mercifully, Jack blacked out for a little while.

When he opened his eyes, he was no longer aboard the burning ship. He seemed to be somewhere else… somewhere as featureless as his smoke-filled cabin had been, but…elsewhere. He could tell because there were no flames, and he could breathe fine.

If indeed he *was* breathing….

Jack wasn't sure of anything, right now. He could feel his body, feel the pain from his burned left arm and his branded right arm, but it was distant, muffled, as though he'd gulped half a flask of rum. The really good stuff.

Jack sat up, then managed to get to his feet. He was able to stand, but that was strange, because there didn't seem to be a solid surface beneath him.

Where the devil am I? Jack wondered, turning his head. His sea chest was there, with him. Somehow he must have managed to hang onto it.

The word "devil" resounded in his mind. And then, suddenly, he knew where he was. He was wherever Davy Jones met up with dead or dying mariners. Any moment now, Old Squid Face himself was bound to appear. He'd call Jack's name…and that meant it was all over.

But it can't be, he thought. *There are so many things I want to do!*

Jack stood there. After a moment he shifted his weight and looked around again.

It's bloody rude to keep a chap waiting, he thought.

But maybe he didn't have to wait. Maybe he could summon Jones? He'd seen the Pirate Lords do it, after all. And there were whispers…rumors…that Jones would sometimes negotiate, make deals, with mariners brave or brazen enough to confront him, then stand up to him. He'd faced Jones before, hadn't he?

Jack was desperate enough to try anything. He closed his eyes, recalling the words. He'd have to adapt them a bit. Not for the first time, he wondered what that stuff about "binding the queen in her bones" was all about.

Clearing his throat, Jack spoke aloud: "Davy Jones…I, Jack Sparrow, kin of a Pirate Lord, call you. I entreat you by your alliance with the Brethren of the Coast. You gave those mortals powers over the sea, binding the queen in her bones, and I am of their blood. I entreat you. Come to me, Davy Jones. I summon you. I summon you. I summon you."

He peered into the blankness, but there was nothing there. No monstrous shape. Nothing but the blankness. *Bloody hell. I've failed….*

Jack blinked…and he was there.

He'd forgotten how dreadful that grayish-white countenance was.

The tentacles stirred, reaching out for him. Jones's little eyes had a greedy spark as he regarded Jack.

Swallowing hard, Jack steadied himself, assuming an air of confidence he didn't feel. Placing his hands together, he bobbed a bow at the unearthly captain. What title had the Pirate Lords addressed Jones by? "Your Squidliness" probably wouldn't do.

Jones's expression changed, his eyes narrowing with suspicion as they peered through the squid-flesh that served

him in lieu of human features. “You are not of the Brethren Court!” he exclaimed. “Who *are* you, audacious boy, to summon me thus?”

Jack bobbed another bow. “I’m Captain Jack Sparrow… sir.”

“Ahhhhhh…I remember you now. Teague’s whelp.”

Jack nodded.

“You are young to be a captain, boy,” Jones observed, studying him.

“Thank you, Captain Jones,” Jack said. “I’m really quite good at it, I assure you. And I’d like to *remain* a captain.”

“Why have you summoned me, Sparrow?” Was Jack mistaken, or did he see a tiny flash of what might have been amusement in those beady little eyes?

“Captain Jones,” Jack said, marshaling all his considerable negotiating skills, “the fact that I’m here, talking to you, means that I’m, er…either dying or dead, correct?”

“Dying, yes.”

“That is just *really* unfortunate,” Jack said. “I’m too young to die. I haven’t accomplished half what I wanted to do. Maybe not even a third.”

“They all say that.” Jones clicked his lobster claw impatiently. “Get on with it, boy.”

“Well, I’m a capable, experienced mariner,” Jack said. “Very good hand. I can do anything aboard a ship. If it floats on the water, and has sails, I can sail it. I suspect I’d be very useful to you, Captain Jones.”

Davy Jones eyed him, while Jack held his breath, waiting.

Finally, Jones said, “What is it you want? And what have you to trade for it?”

“Well, I have my immortal soul,” Jack said. “At least, I’m pretty sure I didn’t misplace it somewhere along the way.”

Again that glint in the tiny eyes that might have indicated amusement. “Go on, Sparrow. What is it you

want?”

“Well,” said Jack, “that will take a little while to enumerate, but I’ve got it all worked out. Do you mind if I sit down? I’ve had rather a rough day, all things considered….”

Without waiting for permission, Jack sat down, cross-legged, on nothing. “That’s better. Now, as to what I want. First of all, there’s the matter of my ship….”

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Epilogue
The Black Pearl

One sunny morning in the pirate town of Tortuga, Captain Jack Sparrow headed purposefully up the dock toward his new, coal-black ship. In each hand, he carried a bottle of rum. Reaching the gangplank, he sashayed up it, then stepped down onto the black deck. His recently acquired crew of buccaneers, realizing that something important was in the offing—and that the "something" quite likely involved rum—gathered around him.

It was a beautiful day in the Caribbean, perfect for a maiden voyage. The sun was so brilliant it could nearly blind a man as it reflected off the water. Mindful of that, Jack, remembering the kohl his ladies had used on their eyes to such good effect, had acquired some of the black substance in Tortuga. When he'd dressed this morning, Jack had carefully applied the kohl to both his upper and lower lids. He was pleased with the result. It really did cut down on the glare, and, he thought, gave him quite a dashing air. His beard was coming along nicely. Jack was thinking about doing something distinctive with it when it got a bit longer. Perhaps he'd loop it up and tie it? Or maybe braid it?

Jack grinned at his crew, revealing the flash of *two* gold teeth. He'd needed work done on another front tooth for a while, and he'd figured, as long as he had the gold from the secret compartment in his cabin, he might as well use it on that problematical tooth.

A bit more than half of that gold was gone, now, but Jack figured it had been worth it to properly provision and supply his magnificent new vessel. His negotiations with

Davy Jones had specified that his ship be properly armed, but all his impressive new guns required a sufficient amount of powder and cannonballs.

“All right, lads, follow me!” Jack shouted, beckoning to his men. In Tortuga’s best tradition, they were a motley bunch of ruffians, scarred, tattooed, and armed to their often blackened teeth.

Smiling happily, Jack, followed by his crew, wended his way up to the bow of the ship, past her black hatches, up the starboard bow ladder bordered by the black railings, past her black foremast. He came to a halt where the bow narrowed, culminating in the long, black bowsprit. On each side of the bow hung a black anchor. Between the anchors and beneath the bowsprit lay Jack’s immediate goal: the ship’s figurehead, a graceful black angel, cupping her outstretched left hand to release a black dove into flight. It was a beautiful figurehead, and completely new to the ship.

Jack sometimes wondered why Davy Jones had felt it necessary to supply Jack’s ship, the resurrected and transformed *Wicked Wench*, with a figurehead. The original *Wench* didn’t have one.

Putting down one of the bottles of rum, Jack jumped down into the forecastle, moving as far forward as he could, so he was standing right above the black angel. Balancing himself by placing his booted foot up on the lower part of the black side rail, Jack couldn’t help admiring his new footgear for a moment. They were still a little stiff, having been completed just this week by the best cobbler in Tortuga. Ah, pirate boots. One could really *swagger* while wearing them, couldn’t one?

“Mates, please listen up!” Jack waved the bottle of rum he was still holding. “Your captain has an announcement to make!” His crew stopped murmuring, giving him—or was it the rum?—their full attention.

“My fellow shipmates,” Jack said, accompanying his oration with a sweeping gesture, “today we set out on our

new enterprise, seeking adventure, swag, and fame. And, perhaps, rum and salty wenches." He winked broadly, and his crew responded with guffaws, elbowing each other. Jack had made sure to select only candidates with a sense of humor. This new ship was going to be a happy one; he just knew it. "And so, mates, I would like to inaugurate our maiden voyage by following tradition and smashing a bottle over our lovely angel here. May she keep us safe, and guide us on our journeys!"

Jack leaned over, took aim at the figurehead, raised the bottle of rum, and gave it a vigorous swing—

—only to stop his hand before the glass touched the wooden angel's wing.

He straightened up. "Gentlemen, I find meself incapable of smashing—and thus *wasting*—a bottle of perfectly good rum. That would be a *sin*, gents, now wouldn't it?"

Grinning, his men indicated their complete agreement. Jack raised the rum bottle to his lips, grabbed the cork in his teeth, and pulled. The cork came free. He spat it out. "That's better! Mates, I now libate—if there indeed be such a word, which I rather doubt—our lovely angel here. May she watch out for us, keep us safe, and guide us on our journeys!"

Leaning over, Jack splashed a generous dollop of rum over the angel's head. Then, raising the rum high, he shouted, "I christen thee…the *Black Pearl*!" He took a large gulp of the rum, feeling the lovely burn as it coursed its way down his gullet. "Here's to me lovely *Black Pearl*, gents. Please toast our beautiful lady with me!"

The crew erupted into assorted cheers. "Huzzah! Hurray for Captain Sparrow! Cheers for the *Black Pearl*! Huzzah for the *Black Pearl*!"

Climbing back up out of the forecastle, Jack passed the open bottle to his new quartermaster, a villainous-looking Dutchman named Jan van der Groote. Then he pulled the cork on the other bottle, took another drink, and started

that one making the rounds, too. He hadn't managed to find a first mate yet. Maybe there'd be someone in Shipwreck Cove….

Even though he'd promised himself that he'd focus on the future, not the past, Jack found himself thinking of Robby for a moment. He hoped his friend had reached shore safely, dug up his share of the pharaoh's reward, then used the gold to go back to England and buy himself a snug little farm. Maybe Robby would actually pursue that whole seminary and taking orders notion. The lad really would make a good minister. He was probably the only Englishman Jack had ever met that really tried to live his beliefs—yet managed not to be a prig about it. He deserved that farm and that vicar's collar, and a rosy-cheeked girl who was plump in all the right places….

The cheering was dying down now. Both bottles of rum were empty, which was no surprise. Jack wet his finger and held it up, as a breeze tugged at his loose hair. It was long now, past his shoulders. He nodded. The winds were favorable. Time to go.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Jack bellowed, "All hands! Make sail! Prepare to cast off on my order! Helm, stand by to set course! Cheerily, lads!"

Jack strode back and forth, watching, evaluating the response of his crew. The great black sails rose, as the sweating men heaved on the lines. Jack wasn't satisfied with the effort they were putting into it. "You call that heaving?" he sneered. "I've seen grandmothers that could do better! Try it again, with a will, and *lively*, you barnacle-encrusted lummoxes! *Heave*!"

"Cast off all lines!"

The tempo of work increased. Jack looked up, shading his eyes against the sun. *I* ***must*** *get myself a bloody hat.*

As the *Black Pearl* got under way, gliding out of the harbor, Jack headed up to the quarterdeck. His helmsman, a young Spaniard named Domingo Velasquez, who had

proudly told Jack that his father had sailed aboard *Venganza* under command of Don Rafael, looked at him expectantly. Jack gave him his course. It was odd to be up here, on the quarterdeck, with everything painted black, instead of the chestnut color of the *Wicked Wench*. But he'd known that black paint would hide the burn marks most effectively. And besides…a black ship with black sails, a *fast* black ship with black sails, was the stuff on which legends were built, here in the Caribbean.

"You will be pleased when we clear the harbor and put up the t'gallants and royals," Jack told Domingo. "I believe that with the wind, the *Pearl* will be the fastest ship you've ever sailed on. Uncatchable, savvy?"

Jack felt confident that his boast would prove true. So far, Davy Jones had fulfilled his side of the bargain admirably. Jack had been very careful when he'd negotiated, making his terms very precise.

Captain of the fastest pirate vessel in the Caribbean, Jack thought. *Faster than* Venganza*. Esmeralda is going to lose that red hat of hers….*

Jack took a deep breath of the sea air, and felt his soul sing within him. *And I've still got it, my ruddy soul…for thirteen more years at least….*

Thirteen years. And after that, Jack belonged to Davy Jones and the *Flying Dutchman*, body and soul, to serve for a hundred years. Old Squid-face drove a hard bargain.

Thirteen years wasn't all that long a time….

Jack shivered, then resolutely gave himself a mental shake. Something would turn up. Somehow he'd get out of the bargain. *I'm Captain Jack Sparrow*, he thought. *And I'm good at getting myself out of situations. I'll figure something out….*

Jack wandered over to the other side of the quarterdeck, turned his back on the helmsman, then reached beneath Amenirdis's sash to extract Tia Dalma's compass. He flipped it open to check their heading. *Right on course.*

Jack wasn’t taking any chances of running afoul of Teague, or any of the other Pirate Lords who might be sailing the Caribbean. He was taking the *Pearl* straight to Shipwreck Cove, and there he would clear his name. He had Christophe’s sword, and he knew Esmeralda would speak for him. And after that? Jack grinned. Merchant ships here on the Spanish Main were going to need their white flags. Particularly ships sailing under the flag of the East India Trading Company. Captain Jack Sparrow planned to honor them with special attention.

He pulled up both sleeves. The burns on his left arm, and the “P” brand on his right arm, were nearly healed and no longer pained him. His first tattoo, which he’d had put just above the “P” brand, was still a bit tender, but that was to be expected. Jack flexed his right forearm with satisfaction. The tattoo artist had done a nice job. The tattoo depicted a sparrow, flying free, over stylized ocean waves. *Most fitting*, Jack thought, pulling down his sleeve. *Because this particular Sparrow is going to fly fast, and far, and free….*

Jack headed down the ladder to the captain’s quarters. He sighed when he looked at the dark walls. He missed his bright colors. Perhaps he’d get the place repainted, when he had a bit of time.

Most of his belongings had perished in the fire, but his sword, pistol, and, of course, the contents of his sea chest had survived. He’d gotten a new baldric for his cutlass, one with a fancy silver buckle.

Jack rummaged through his sea chest until he pulled out two large rectangles of silk. One was white. He’d need it to be allowed to approach Shipwreck Island for a parlay. Otherwise, the cannons mounted on the cliff walls would make short work of his *Pearl*—and he couldn’t have that. He’d sacrificed too much for this ship. He intended to sail with her for a long, long time. Rather like a marriage, he supposed.

The other rectangle he withdrew was his own flag. He was still refining it. Against a black silk background, a white skull was shown in profile. In the upper right-hand corner, a red sparrow took wing. *Very classy*, Jack thought, proudly. *Though the workmanship can't possibly compare to Amenirdis's. Should I hoist it, in honor of the* Pearl*'s maiden voyage?* Jack shrugged. *Why not?*

Carrying his flag, he went back out and strolled the weather deck, making sure everything was in order. When he was satisfied that all was shipshape, Jack went over to one of his hands, a burly black man, whose speech patterns reminded him a bit of Chamba.

"Good morning, Kwame."

"Mornin' Cap'n Sparrow. It be a *joli* day, yes?"

"Extremely *joli*," Jack agreed. "I thought it would be nice to run up me flag on our maiden voyage. Will you do the honors?" He handed Kwame the folded black silk.

"Aye, Cap'n!"

Jack headed back up to the quarterdeck. He got there just in time to see his flag ascend to the top of the mast, and flutter there, black as ink and bold as brass. Seeing it, Jack nodded. Turning to Domingo, he smiled. "I'd like to take her for while."

The wind had picked up, whipping Jack's unbound hair across his face, into his mouth, and eyes. "Stand by, Domingo," Jack said. Reaching beneath his sash, he found a small, folded bulge of fabric, and tugged it free. Esmeralda's red bandanna.

Jack faced into the wind, and, as his hair blew back, he wrapped the bandanna around his head and secured it. "There! Much better, don't you think?"

"*Sí, Capitán*!"

Stepping over to the wheel again, Jack raised his hands, sliding his fingers over the familiar spokes, caressing them. The wheel was darker than it had been before, but it wasn't quite black. Jack glanced at the binnacle, and felt the life of

his ship beneath his feet. Black against the blue sky, his flag fluttered.

After glancing at the waves, Jack turned the wheel ever so slightly, making sure the sails were precisely as he wanted them. As usual, his ship was yar. If anything, the *Black Pearl* was even more responsive than she'd been before she'd surged up from the sea bottom in a mighty burst of magic. As Jack had clung to her mast, wide-eyed, his reborn ship had coasted serenely into Tortuga Harbor—the destination Jack had specified to Jones.

Jack remembered little of the "journey" that had taken them from the African Coast to Tortuga Harbor. There had been the sensation of incredible, rushing momentum, then a bright flash of green that had dazzled his eyes, and then… he was back.

"She goes good, *sí, Capitán*?" Domingo said.

Jack smiled. "She goes very good indeed," he said.

Joy filled him. He was free, and he had his *Pearl…*surely life could hold no more. "Let go the t'gallants and sheet home, lads," he shouted. "Catch that wind and put her to work!" Jauntily, Jack Sparrow began to whistle—the same pirate jig that he and Esmeralda had danced to, long ago… in another lifetime.

Obedient to her captain's will, the *Black Pearl* followed her dark angel over the azure water; as fast as the wind, as free as the men who sailed her. It was almost as though she knew she was a legend in the making, destined for adventures both great and terrible….

THE BEGINNING

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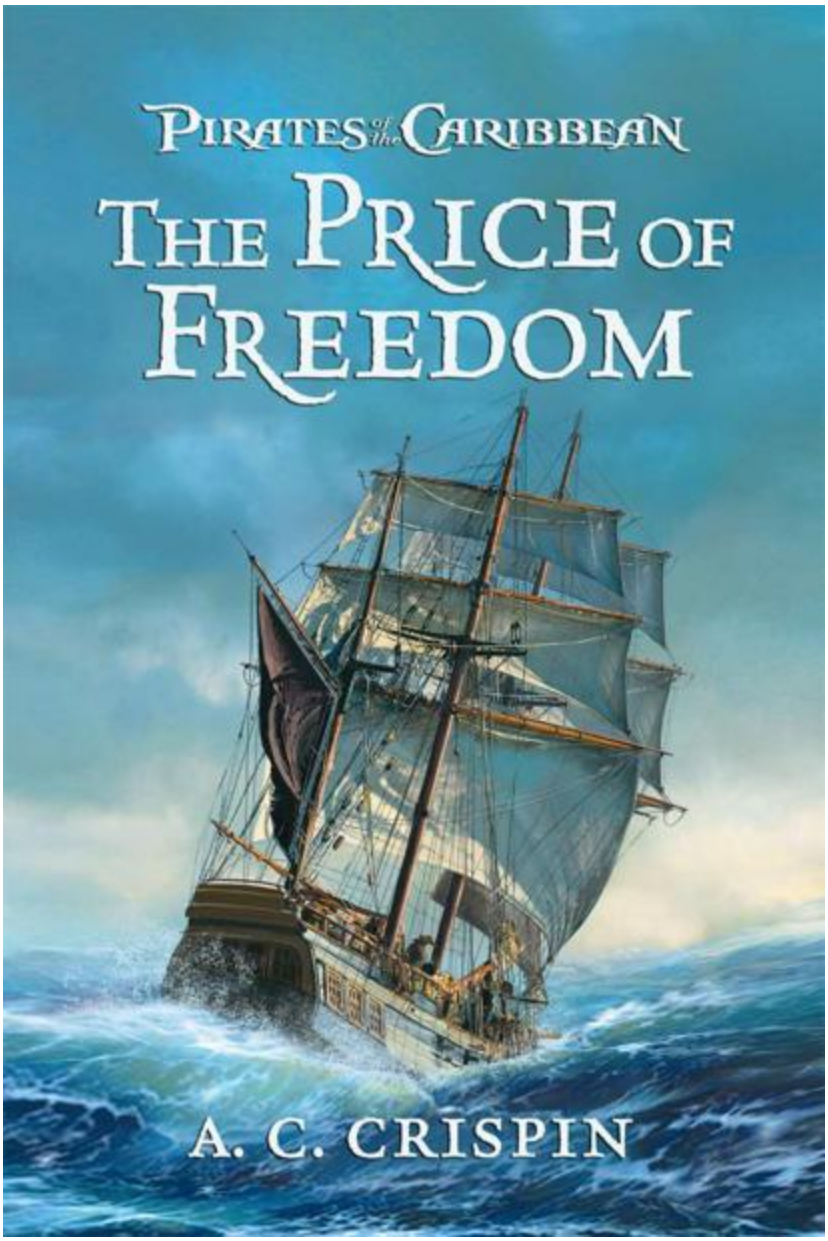
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